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Bardic Runes XII

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# BARDIC RUNES XII

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## RUNEFOLKS

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The reproductive quality is thanks to LASER ZONE.

Those who have contributed art and fiction are listed above as well as at the back.

This is the twelfth issue, a special issue, as the Gvihlih-hihn numerical system is base twelve. May it provide the reader with at least as much pleasure as the previous ones.

## BARDIC RUNES

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## JUST ONE OF THOSE DAYS

Ellen Dawn Benefield

"Master!" the unfortunate stableboy yelled as he dashed into the kitchen, "the mage's griffin escaped and ate the barbarian's warhorse, the unicorn has colic and your palfrey has thrown a shoe." The boy ducked aside as a pot came crashing by his head.

"I'm ruined," groaned the innkeeper, wringing his hands. "Where's Jarby? Breakfast is burned, phantom rats are under the beds, a ghost's in the pantry and now this! Where is that rascalion nephew of mine? How does he expect to inherit this place if he doesn't manage it?" the man shouted shaking his fist in the boy's face. The stableboy backed away as the huge man loomed over him, mustaches bristling, "Go find him."

"Yes, master." The stableboy scrambled out of the kitchen and pelted upstairs to an attic bedroom. Trembling, he knocked on the door. "Jarby, it's Poke. Your uncle wants you."

"Yes, I heard. Probably every guest in the Inn heard him. It's barely dawn. His customers are liable to be irate. Sorry to leave you, Yanith. It sounds like one of those days. I'll be back when I can."

Poke snorted. If Ragon Argist found his nephew engaged to a tavern wench with no dowry, he'd probably look for a new heir. Fortunately for Jarby, his Uncle Ragon had no other relatives.

Jarby slipped about the door, combing his hair with his fingers. Yanith's raven locked head leaned out of the doorway. Poke made a face as Jarby kissed her and pushed her back into the room. "Better get dressed for work, love."

"When are you going to tell your uncle we're getting married? Eeek! Jarby, there's a rat under the bed!"

"Is it glowing?"

"Yes, like a coal."

"It isn't real, just ignore it."

"It gives me the shivers. Something eerie is going on in this place."

Jarby sighed. "I know, and Uncle Ragon expects me to take care of it. Today is not a good day to talk to my uncle about anything, Yanith. He expects me to deal with magic. Do I look like a mage to you?"

Yanith leaned out the door, nightgown draped about her. "You look like heaven to me," she murmured, kissing his neck.

Poke frowned at her pretty face in disgust, then grabbed Jarby by the

arm and yanked forcefully at him. "Come on, Jarby, you want to get us both in trouble? What do you want with her, anyway?"

The young man ruffled the boy's dark curls. "One day you'll find out. What's happened now?"

The boy repeated his story, stumbling over the words in his excitement. Jarby sighed.

"Where is the barbarian?"

"Still dozing at the table in front of the fireplace. He drank himself to sleep and I'll bet he has a head this morning."

"Charming," the young man muttered, running his fingers through his tangled brown curls. He scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "Hm. Where's the mage?"

The boy pointed at a slender figure seated at a table downstairs. Jarby nodded. "You get the horse doctor and the blacksmith. Off with you now. I'll tend to the mage."

Long legs took the stairs two at a time. Jarby leaped over the bannister near the end of the stairs, startling the mage in the middle of his enormous breakfast.

"You, mage, are you the owner of the griffin parked in our barn? The one who devoured the barbarian's warhorse?" Jarby pointed at the huge warrior slumbering at the table across from them, his head in his plate. Drunken snores filled the room.

The mage choked on his ale, turning white. Setting the tankard down with a trembling hand, he nodded. Jarby jerked his head toward the doorway and headed for the stable.

The mage, keeping a cautious eye on the snoring barbarian, hastily continued eating. Casting a final glance over his shoulder, he grabbed the last pastry on the plate and followed the young manager.

Jarby sighed, shaking his head at the nearly stripped carcass on the floor. It had been a fine stallion. Snores came from the stall where the griffin slumbered, its belly bulging.

The adjoining stall was not as quiet; the unicorn thrashed about, nearly goring his swollen belly with his horn as he rolled, groaning, in the straw.

"Whoa, baby, whoa," Jarby crooned. A blue pod crunched under his foot. Quava beans! The beast had gotten into the garden last night. Where had that dratted stableboy been to allow this mess to happen?

The mage appeared at the doorway, licking the crumbs from his fingers, as Jarby eased himself into the stall. Leery of the flailing hooves and horns, the inn manager tried to get the animal to its feet.

"Mage, quit wringing your hands and help this poor beast."

"My name is Norgus," the mage informed him, scrambling through the

stall door. Chanting in a soothing tone, he laid his hands on the equine's swollen belly. The groans stopped. The manager and the mage coaxed the swaying mount to his feet. Then Jarby rubbed the unicorn dry with a blanket.

"I need a favour, young sir," Norgus said. "Is that your mount?" He was gesturing at the fine black mare in the opposite stall.

"No, that one is." Jarby pointed at the old nag placidly munching hay next to the mare.

The mage sighed. "He'll have to do. Please, may I have him? I'll give you a promissory note. Once I return from my journey I will get you a better steed. Please, sir. It's a matter of life or death."

A roar of rage from outside the stable and a look at the mage's sweating brow convinced Jarby. The barbarian would undoubtedly hold him responsible as well.

"All right, Norgus," he said, regretfully.

"A million thanks, young sir. I will reward you. I promise."

The mage stepped out of the stall, pulling a wand from a flowing sleeve. He waved this over the pile of bones as he chanted.

To Jarby's horror, the intact head of the carcass began to resemble his gelding's and his gelding blurred in his stall. There, unscathed, stood the warhorse of the barbarian.

"It worked! Finally, it worked!" Norgus rubbed his hands in glee.

"What have you done? You've killed Brownie!" Jarby's fists clenched, his face red as he glared at the wizard.

"No, no, sir, I merely gave the bones his aspect and transformed him to a young warhorse. He still has the same personality. Of course, it will change once he realizes he's a stallion."

The big bay whickered in agreement, just as the barbarian charged into the stable, wild-eyed.

"What have you done with my Zinga?" he roared.

"Calm yourself, good sir. Your steed is safe." Jarby raised a restraining arm, holding the warrior and gesturing to the horse. The barbarian grunted, peering anxiously at his quiet mount.

He staggered over to the horse and crooned into the stallion's ear in a decidedly unbarbaric tone. "Good boy, Zinga. Now stay in this stall and quit switching around." He slipped the stallion a lump of sugar, then scowled at the onlookers. Swaggering, he headed for the door. He threw a last command over his shoulder as he lumbered toward the Inn, holding his head in both hands. "Take good care of that horse. He's worth more to me than a woman."

The mage sighed, dabbing at his brow with a silk kerchief. "Thank you, young sir. I owe you, so I will tell you this. There is a curse on the Dancing Dragon

Inn and I can tell you how to lift it."

"Who did it?" demanded Jarby.

"Paka Sheed, of the Crowing Griffin across the street," the mage replied, just as Poke, horse doctor and blacksmith in tow, burst through the door.

Working as a team, Jarby and Poke drenched the unicorn with the healer's potion. The horse doctor listened to the horse's belly, grunted and held out a hand for his silver.

Sighing, the manager paid him as the smith looked at the mare's hoof and pronounced it cracked and abscessed. "Send my uncle a bill, and have breakfast on the house. There's something I must attend to immediately."

Jarby followed the retreating back of the mage. The old guy was quick when he wished to be, he thought, as the mage slipped upstairs and slammed his door.

The manager hammered on the door with his fist and it opened by itself. Norgus stood muttering over his bag, pulling out more junk than could possibly fit into such a small knapsack.

"Here's an amulet. Wear it. Invoke it with your will. Sprinkle the cursed object with the powder and chant the spell. You'd better memorize it. Good luck and good-bye."

Jarby cleared his throat, silently extending a hand palm up. Reluctantly, Norgus pressed a few coins into his hands.

"How do I find this curse?"

"Simple. Look for a black and red aura about an object. The spell will send it back to Paka."

"What object?"

"Why, any object Paka decided to have a curse placed upon and transported here. I must be on my way, dear boy. Spent too much time here as it is." The mage stuffed everything into his small knapsack. It showed no sign of bulging.

Jarby eyed the bag uneasily. There wasn't possibly enough space in there to hold all that gear. He turned away, suppressing a shudder. "But how do I find this object?" Jarby protested, turning back to face the mage. Silence answered him. The room was empty.

"Norgus?"

"Jarby!" roared his uncle's voice from downstairs. He sighed. The rest of the day went no better than the morning. Jarby sank gratefully into his bed. There'd be no chance tonight to get into Yanith's room. Exhausted, he dropped off, only to be awakened by a pounding on his door.

"Manager, manager, get up! How can I possibly sleep with that racket going on downstairs? I demand you put a stop to it at once!"



Jarby groaned, rubbing his eyes and slipping on his sandals. He had rather expected this and had not undressed to sleep. Opening the door, he squinted against the torchlight. A small, chubby man in a nightshirt and cap stood there, red faced with indignation. Now Jarby could hear the off-key wailing. It seemed to be coming from the main dining room.

"I'll take care of it," he said, smothering a yawn. The man nodded and marched jerkily down the hall to his room. Sighing, the tall youth slipped on the amulet and placed the powder in his jerkin pocket. He stumbled downstairs, yawning and grumbling to himself.

"What are you doing out of the pantry?" he yelled at the ghost. The spirit sat in mid-air, plucking on an out of tune lute and yodelling loudly in an off key minor.

"I was bored, and the rats decided to haunt it. I always wanted to be a minstrel, so here I am. Nobody appreciates me. Everyone in the room left."

"The way you sing, I can see why someone killed you! You've driven out ten paying guests."

The ghost sniffed. "Floor sleepers. They couldn't afford the price of a room, so who cares?" He ran translucent fingers over the strings, causing the manager to clasp his hands over his ears.

"Out! Get out of here," Jarby commanded, putting on his best glare.

Languidly, the shade sprawled on his side in the air and regarded him. "You don't scare easily, do you, boy?"

"No. Are you the curse?" Jarby examined the spirit's blue aura, no sign of black or red.

"Of course not! I just came with it. Do I look like a curse to you?"

"No, but you sound like one, so be quiet."

The ghost sniggered, waving a hand at the table. "There's your curse," the haunt smirked as something black and white waddled out from under the table, tail fluffed up and sharp fanged mouth agape in a hiss. Jarby froze with horror, his hair raising on the back of his neck. Instinctively, he backed up as the glowing red and black skunk bounced at him.

Invoking the amulet with all his will, he fumbled with the powder, his panic choking him. Jarby tossed it at the skunk and chanted hastily, then ran, holding his nose. Just as he fled out the front door an awful stench hit the air.

Jarby finished the chant as the skunk charged after him and vanished, stink and all. Coughing, the manager sat on the porch, gulping the sweet air as screams came from across the street.

Customers in all states of dress and undress, some of them undoubtedly whores, tumbled through the door of the Crowing Griffin and fled to the Dancing Dragon Inn. Jarby howled with laughter. It seemed that everyone was suddenly

eager to check into the Dragon.

Paka Sheed's rotund figure fell through the door and into the street, his hands tearing at the enraged skunk on his back. At last, the vengeful animal trotted off, leaving Paka retching up his dinner and pawing at his eyes.

Jarby wrinkled his nose at the horrid stench and called to the innkeeper, "I'll send over a barrel of tomato juice, Paka. Just don't come near me!" Jarby sprinted into the Inn and slammed the door.

The ghost had vanished along with the rats. Jarby bribed one of the barbarians to roll a keg of tomato juice over to Paka, enrolled the guests and returned to his bed.

A week later Yanith and Jarby held a rendezvous in the barn, lying next to the stall where Jarby's mount was once kept. A thump made them jump to their feet. Yanith screamed and crumpled into the straw as Jarby caught her. A note appeared in his hand.

"Dearest boy,

This is a ranth, both steed and watchdog; also body guard. He will serve you well. He's an omnivore. Just feed him any old thing. Garbage will do nicely."

Sincerely,

Norgus Esquire

P.S. I left some jewels in the saddle bags.

Jarby stared as the dragon-horse extended bat wings and showed fangs in the corner of its mouth. It whickered plaintively at him and Jarby unfroze. It did sound like a horse. Reaching out a hand, he scratched its neck ridges and its red eyes glowed as it purred with pleasure.

Yanith woke with a gasp.

"Don't worry, love, he's friendly and rather pretty once you get used to him. Just look at those golden scales."

Jarby reached down with one strong hand and drew her to her feet. Hesitantly, Yanith reached out and rubbed the small muzzle. The ranth purred, twitching small, equine ears covered with golden scales.

"Oh, Jarby, he's just precious."

"Jarby!"

Yanith made a face. "Your uncle wants you."

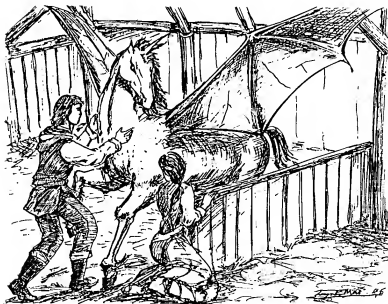
"Let him wait." He rummaged through the saddle bags and poured a dozen glittering gems into her outstretched palm. "Your dowry, my lady. Now we talk to my uncle."

"Oh, Jarby!" Yanith squealed, throwing her arms about his neck.

Poke rushed into the barn. "Jarby! The barbarians started a brawl with the mercenaries. They're breaking the dining room to pieces."

Jarby sighed, untangling Yanith's arms from about his neck. Then he grinned. Pulling the latch, he beckoned to the ranth to follow him on its sharp clawed feet. He'd bet one ranth was worth a dozen fighters.

Winking at Yanith, he blew her a kiss. "See you tonight, love." Jarby scratched the ranth, grinning as he led it toward the sounds of the brawl. "Just another one of those days at the Dancing Dragon Inn, Ranth. Now, sic'em."



## MOONLIGHT SHADOWS

Beatrice Lanctot

Mitsuko shivered in the night's soft breeze and thought about returning to the warmth of her room inside the inn, but the peacefulness of the garden beckoned her. The trees swayed gently above the starlit path, leading to the pond and she stopped for a moment, enjoying the silence.

Despite the long and arduous journey to Yedo she didn't feel tired at all. She had thoroughly enjoyed the trip to the sun-goddess temple, and she felt sure that she would soon be blessed with the baby she had prayed for.

The silk rustling of her kimono almost covered the voices of the two men seated by the lily pond at the end of the garden. They hadn't noticed her, she realized, so she sat on the smooth rock beneath the cherry tree, letting her eyes wander over the carefully raked sand. She had noticed the two ninjas earlier in the dining room. Suddenly, her curiosity was piqued. One of the men had just mentioned the name of Naganao, her own lord and daymio, and the other replied something that she couldn't hear.

Scolding herself for her curiosity, she nevertheless strained to hear more. The April night turned cold around her as the two, oblivious of her presence, discussed the details of the murder they had been hired for. Trembling with fear, aware that being discovered now meant certain death, she inched closer. Hidden by the cherry tree heavy with blossoms she listened as drops of icy sweat ran down her back.

"It should be easy, brother. Lord Aku-Taro said that the daymio always goes alone to pray at the grove where his father was assassinated. Even the captain of his samurai is not permitted to accompany him. After he's dead we just have to take his two swords and fan and bring them to Aku-Taro." The older man nodded and sipped the clear sake, pale silver in the moonlight.

"He is a sly one, our employer. I've heard that he was a pirate on the seas of China before he gained the friendship of our young shogun, may Buddha keep him." His partner turned around sharply, but what he had taken for a short, hot breath must have been just a gust of wind, so he relaxed and whispered back.

"Never repeat that! Aku-Taro is a man to be feared and he doesn't like to hear the truth. Look at what he has in stock for daymio Naganao. I know for sure that their enmity started more than twenty years ago, when Aku-Taro came to the province as soon as he knew of a young lord in power. How do you think he has acquired his lands and titles? Young daymios are easy to enchant with beautiful concubines, rare sake and opium." The young ninja continued, a cruel smile stretching his lips. "One day they simply agree to be adopted by Aku-Taro

and then they conveniently die, leaving him the sole heir. It didn't work with Naganao, though."

The older man sighed wistfully.

"No, but it worked with our shogun. You'll see how nobody will blame Aku-Taro for the untimely demise of Naganao. And when he'll present the ceremonial swords and fan, maybe some false documents testifying that twenty years ago there was an adoption act will be produced, and the shogun will hurry to entrust him with the province of the late daymio."

The young assassin shrugged. His black clad shape hardly left a shadow in the trailing light of the moon. "That is not our problem. For us, the Brotherhood will always provide. Let's go to sleep. We must rest well if we are to reach the castle by the end of the week. May Buddha grant you peace, brother."

With soft, fluid movements, the two were gone from the garden and Mitsuko sat on the dewy grass, oblivious to the possible stains on her plum-coloured silks. The shining, silent moon offered no answer to her painful dilemma. Try as she might, there was no way she could reach the castle before the two assassins. And even if she would, and these two were caught, nothing would stop Aku-Taro from trying again and again, until he would succeed. She hugged her knees and thought frantically. Since she lacked the strength and skills to take on two ninjas, she had to find another way.

The only method to stop future attacks would be to prevent Aku-Taro from issuing orders, and that meant killing the ex-irate. But Naganao would never hire assassins, even to defend himself. His honour would prevent him from doing anything not sanctioned by the Bushido, the sacred samurai code of conduct. If she could give Naganao proof of Aku-Taro's murderous intentions, then he could challenge the enemy and even the shogun could not stop an honourable duel. Proof, that's what she needed. She prayed fervently to the sun-goddess, walking over the path's smooth pebbles, listening to the faint stirring of leaves above her head as she treaded over the narrow bridge towards the inn. The building was in complete darkness, except for the lanterns swaying gently above the entrance.

She knew the samurai code all too well, with all its legends of honour and courage, and nothing seemed to provide advice for the circumstances. Dark thoughts swirled through her mind as she clasped her hands in despair. Life was worthless without honour, she repeated to herself, banishing thoughts of finding the assassin's room and killing the two in their sleep. Not that she would be really able to get them before one would certainly overpower her. Death didn't scare her, but failure certainly did. If she couldn't prevent the crime, her life wasn't worth much anyway. If these two, or any other would kill the daymio, then her entire family would be dishonoured and banished since a samurai is supposed to die protecting his lord. The thought of her father and husband dressed in the grey robe of an

outcast samurai, subject to scorn and derision, brought tears to her eyes. If only she could die to prevent it from happening, she gladly would.

Her breath stopped for a long, burning second. If she would lose her life to the ninjas and Lord Naganao would find out who had employed them. That would be reason for an honourable duel challenge which Aku-Taro would certainly lose. Naganao was recognized as one of the finest fighters in the whole empire, and an ex-irate wouldn't stand a chance. She walked swiftly inside the inn and counted the rooms. The one at the end, where two pairs of sandals rested outside, had to be the ninjas' room. Except for the two assassins and her own small entourage, there were no other guests.

She considered sneaking inside the rooms and then screaming to alert the owner, but decided against the idea. Either of them could easily overpower the owner and then leave to complete their mission. Instead, she took one sandal and then tiptoed into the inn's unfamiliar kitchen. Blindly, she searched for one of the big knives hung on the wall and stifled a sob as she cut her hand against the sharp blade.

Without a sound, she went to her room and gently pushed the rice-paper door aside. Leaving it open, she slid to her mattress, laid down holding the knife carefully and pushed the stolen sandal to the end of the pallet. Mitsuko's hand trembled slightly on the blade's handle as she propped it against her ribs. She then eased herself into the sleeplike trance that would let her mind fly free to the mountain top castle while her body rested peacefully. The difficulty was in managing to control her leaden limbs once her thoughts would ride the moonlight swiftly. Her dreams had often risen in the swirling mists of night, but never consciously, with a purpose. Still, she had to try and there could be no errors.

She became suddenly aware of the clouds floating under the stars, drifting aimlessly above tree tops, and she almost saw the web of her consciousness separate into silvery threads that lifted above her dark shape. Watching the last of the spider thin strands wave around the edge of her consciousness, she commanded her hand to plunge the blade in, and sighed as she imagined the gush of blood flowing warm on her hand.

Probably the sigh had been loud enough to wake up one of her maids, because a vague memory of senses told her of a scream and a shuffle, but she didn't linger to find out. Her physical essence didn't matter right then, only the message her thoughts would be able to convey through her husband's dreams.

The mountain loomed on the horizon and the castle stood out, tall and white in the balmy night that caressed her thoughts and urged her on. Her husband's dreams were easy to find; she could almost feel their texture, coloured by sounds and shapes she knew well. A little while later, the young samurai woke up from the horrible nightmare that had left him in a cold sweat. The image of two

men, plotting, the blood-covered body of his young wife, her black tresses piteously framing a pale face started to erase from his mind. But the wind stirred the branches outside his room, sending a rain of white blossoms onto the floor, and he realized that it was no ordinary dream, that Mitsuko was trying to tell him something. He grabbed his sword and rushed out of his room.

An hour later a silent group of samurai led by daymio Naganao himself was on the road to Yedo. Mitsuko had no way of knowing that. Exhausted, her physical substance depleted and unable to support her thoughts, she was lying close to death in the inn while a healer, aided by her two maids, was frantically trying to save her life.

Weeks later, after a slow recovery, she was admitted in the presence of Lord Naganao in the great council hall. By then, Aku-Taro was just a memory, his cold ashes scattered in the wind. The two ninjas had been intercepted by Naganao's party and had earned a swift death in combat. When Naganao had reached Yedo, bringing evidence of Aku-Taro's treachery, the shogun had been forced to approve a formal challenge. Aku-Taro had refused to take his own life, as the code of honour would have requested, and had ended dead in the sand under Naganao's blade. That blade, still covered with dried, rusty blood, was laid on the pillow in front of Mitsuko as the lord finished his story.

Around the walls of the ceremonial hall were lined all the family's samurai, who watched in awed silence as Naganao handed the blade to the small, slim woman kneeling in front of him. And hers were not the only tears when she was pronounced honourable Mitsuko-san, warrior of the Asano Naganao family.

## BONE SKY

Cecelia Holland

"For years I have been fascinated by the mystery of the Ishango bones, especially one bone on which seems to be incised the phases of the moon." Cecelia Holland July 7 1995

The earth beneath me, the sky above. The sky was Day and Night. The Day had an Eye, and the Night also. The Day's Eye was steady, always open,

watching all from horizon to horizon. But the Night's Eye closed and opened, opened and closed.

Sometimes in the Day, a weak, pale Eye showed, half-open, and I sat and watched it and thought maybe it was the Night's Eye, wandering.

I knew the Night's Eye saw me back. When the Eye was wide open, I gave off blood, without a wound, without a hurt.

Sella saw me watching. Sella laughed. We were following the antelope. They were dropping their calves and sometimes we could steal a calf. The plain along the river was full of the antelope. The bloody birthrags lay scattered in the grass. Vultures circled in the air and lumbered along over the ground, too heavy with eating to fly.

Sella said, "Inma brings no food. She sits and looks. Let Inma sit far from the fire."

I sat on a hill and watched the sky. The others were eating of the calf we had taken. Sella pointed up at the sky and her hands made signs for eating. "Eat the sky, Inma," she said, and she laughed.

Sella sat nearest the fire. Always before she had been straight and hard, but now she was round in the middle, round as the circle of the sky. Her round belly moved. She let some of us touch it. She did not let me touch it. When she laughed at me all the others laughed also, all but Teco. Teco looked at the Night's Eye and looked at me. I pointed at the sky. I wanted him to see what I saw. He only shook his head. But he smiled at me. In the morning while Sella and the others washed in the river Teco stayed behind with me.

I was glad of this. Every day when they went to the river I held Teco against my belly. But it was bad. Soon the Night's Eye was wide open, but it gave me no blood.

I pushed Teco away. I did not hold Teco again, but still the Night's Eye gave me no blood.

We were in the green grass by the river. Sella groaned on the grass. She broke and a baby dropped out of her.

The baby was of all of us. We held him and carried him around, glad of him. We brought all our food first to Sella, to eat of as she wished, and she ate, and gave herself to the baby.

I grew round, like the Night's Eye. Sella saw this, and hated me. We were by the river, where the bank was high. We dug turtle eggs to eat. Teco gave me an egg to eat that he had not offered first to Sella. Sella spat at me. When Teco gave her another egg she flung it down. Teco gave me no more eggs. He turned his back to me. The others all turned away from me. Sella threw rocks at me and I ran away.

I went off by myself. I ate what I found for myself. The river was good with frogs and fish. I was cold at night. I was cold, I was alone. I sat on the ground



under the Night's Eye and wept for my aloneness.

I followed after the others. I saw them far ahead, in the pale grass. At the circles of their fires I sat in the ash. Their fires were cold. I could smell the others but the smell was cold. I was hungry. I ate but I was hungry still. I was round and full as the Night's Eye but I was empty also.

So the days went by, full and empty. By a cold fire I found a bone, hidden under leaves. It smelled of Teco. There was meat on it. Teco had left it for me. I gnawed it until the meat was gone. I gnawed it when it was bare and dry because Teco had left it for me. I held it. I was cold. I was alone. The wind blew over me like an old bare bone.

I saw the Night's Eye. It was round and full like me. It watched me. I took a sharp stone. I made a mark on the bone, round like the Night's Eye.

In the day, I saw the others, away down the river. I carried the bone with me. I ate mushrooms. With a stick I dug up plants and ate the roots. That night I sat on the cold ground and the Night's Eye rose over me and I touched the mark on the bone. With the sharp stone I made another mark beside it. When Day came I looked at the bone and saw the two marks side by side. I was glad. I was not alone any more.

I went on by the river. I did not see the others or where they went. I ate what I could find for myself. I made marks on the bone. When the Night's Eye began to close I made smaller marks. When the Night's Eye was all closed I made a line.

I looked on the bone and saw the Open Eye. When the Night's Eye was open I looked on the bone and saw it closed. I saw that I had made a little sky of the bone. I saw I had captured the Eye.

My belly hurt. I broke. Water ran over my legs. I squatted down and a baby dropped out of me.

I gave him of me to eat. I held him in one arm and held the bone in the other hand. I laid them down side by side in the soft grass. In the morning when the river smoked I waded like a crane in the shallows, hunting frogs. In the evenings when the lions came down to the river's edge to drink, I climbed up safe into a tree. I held the baby in the crook of my arm and the bone in my hand. When I woke the Night's Eye was watching me through the branches of the tree.

I fed them both. I gave the baby of me and he grew fat and round. I gave the Night's Eye to the bone.

I saw smoke in the sky. I went toward it and saw Teco and Sella and the others, sitting by their fire. I went toward them, not afraid any more. They saw me. They threw no rocks. They rose up and held their hands to me. I went in among them. Sella was alone. No baby lay in her arms. Her arms hung long and empty. I sat down with the others. I let them take my baby and hold him. I let them give

me food to eat. We sat around the fire, and nobody was nearer to the fire than me.

I was of them again. The baby was of them. The bone was of me alone. I made no more marks on it, and I let none of them hold it ever.

## LOYALTIES

D.K. Latta

He was an old man and so she watched over him.

K'rilq crouched some paces from the snapping fire and glanced up at the hunter's moon, bloated with reflected light like some satisfied belly. She sniffed and wiped moisture from under her nose, internally cursing the cool of the autumn breeze.

Her eyes came to rest on the form slumbering beside the small fire. She dragged fingers through her shock of red hair and cocked her head. His breathing was disconcertingly laboured and raspy, testifying to the illness that had worn at his bones for the past few nights.

She pulled her cape more tightly about her small limbs and surveyed the darkness of the surrounding brush, the darkness and the secrets dwelling therein. She did not like darkness, not at all. It was said among her people that in the shadows hid creatures of such vileness that the very sight of them would drive a person mad. The sleeping man had told her that that was merely the superstitions of barbarians, that nothing resided in the darkness that was not there in the light.

Here, now, she willed herself to believe that. She truly did.

The sleeper was called vu Forthium-guh-tolt of the Mohz-guh-Ladequia and he was not, in all technicality, a man.

She had first seen him through the acrid curtains of smoke and wavering sheets of fire that had become her village on the day the neighbouring tribe had descended upon them in a wave of death and terror, intent on wiping them from the face of the world. They more or less succeeded. And she, a terrified child of no more than ten summers, stumbled barefoot through the ash and death, gagging on smoke, vision blurred by tears. One of the raiders spied her and approached, his hands and beard stained with crimson that looked like wine but was not.

Whatever his intentions might have been, he did not fulfill them. Instead he stopped and stared beyond the crying child. K'rilq followed his gaze and witnessed a veritable giant of a man, striding through the acrid grey smoke, a heavy, artfully embroidered cloak about broad shoulders, long silver hair in a ponytail but

shaved at the top of the skull. A medallion carved with alien runes encircled his neck and he bore a broadsword in a knotted fist.

The raider, grinning, hefted his blade and made to fight this newcomer.

In moments the dark stuff that stained his clothes was not all of foreign origin and the big man gathered the terrified girl in powerful arms and carried her from the chaos.

It was not until the next morning, and they were camping some distance from what remained of her home, that she studied her savior carefully for the first time and saw his alien eyes. Cat's eyes. The pupils were slits, not circles. He was of the sorcerer species Mohz; one of the ancient races, the old races. He was also the last.

It was by sheer chance, he explained, that he had decided to investigate the clouds of ebon smoke which stained the sky like ink for miles around, sheer chance that he had rescued her.

That was four summers back, a long time ago. Then she had been but a child. Now she was almost a woman, grown up.

She was almost a woman and he was an old man.

He stirred. She glanced over.

"What's the hour?" he demanded, his voice deep with age and hoarse from sleep.

"Still night."

He sat up stiffly and mumbled, "I thought I'd gone blind."

His sarcasm, she felt, was uncalled for. Her gaze rolled over the muscles in his arms, still thick and strong, and she shook her head. It was only in the little things that his age was betrayed. The way he would forget things now and then, simple things. The way, as now, it would take him some time to rouse himself fully from sleep, where once he would have been alert at the sound of a cracking twig. The way the grip of his left hand was less sure than it should be, and the way, like now, colds seemed to infest his lungs with distressing frequency.

He crouched by the fire and ladled into a bowl some of the foul smelling broth he had concocted.

It was a Mohz remedy. An old potion for an old man. Old, useless. She had tried to interest him in a tribal cure but he had snorted something derisive about 'barbarians' and simply turned away.

It pained her to see him this way, but he was stubborn. Another sign of age.

"What happened to the Mohz?" she asked him suddenly.

He did not turn to regard her. "The Mohz are dead."

"And the woodfolk and the dragons and the gargoyles?"

"All dead," he said softly, distantly. "I'm disappointed that you've

forgotten."

"I haven't forgotten. I just wanted you to say it."

Slowly, his features painted red by the fire, he turned to look at her.

"I know a cure for..."

"Barbarian remedies," he interrupted, "are for fools and imbeciles. If you truly want to learn the way of the Mohz, then you had better remember that."

She scowled. It was true that his magicks had seen them safely through more than a few dangers over the years, but still she persisted. "If Mohz magicks are so great, the Mohz so smart, then how come they're dead, eh?" she demanded. "Maybe we barbarians know a thing or two."

He slurped some of his broth, then growled, "Your species knows how to kill, to lie, to cheat. They are raised without honour or loyalty. Yes, the Mohz are dead and I am a wanderer. And yes, they died at the hands of men." His thin slitted eyes burned into her as he muttered, "Does that make men superior?"

She looked away, to stare at the shadows that seemed less forbidding now that the old man was awake.

"I am the last," he said softly, more to himself than to her. "And when I am gone, all that will remain of the old races will be what you can remember. The music of the wood folk and the flight of the gargoyles will become myth, and the Mohz will become... nothing." He laid the bowl down and, with a cracking of joints, stood. "I am alone."

She turned on him, anger knitting her brow. "No you aren't."

Briefly, a smile creased his craggy features. "You're a child. You do not understand. There are none who can know what I know, who have experienced what I have." He dragged his heavy cloak from the ground where it had been his blanket and drew it about his shoulders. "Once the Mohz traded with the beings of other realities as easily as you can travel from one village to another. Treaties transcended not just distance but time and space as well. But I am too old and tired to breach the dimensional barriers now."

"I've lost my village," she reminded him.

"One village of many. When all about you have faces alien to your own, then you will know how I feel."

She pursed her lips and looked away.



A snapping of twigs caused them to exchange glances. K'rilq threw back her cape to free the poniard depending from her belt, while he merely seated himself upon the ground; beneath him, shrouded by his cloak, was his sword.

The rustling continued, sporadically for a moment, then shadows pulled free of the brush. K'rilq tensed instinctively, her mouth dry, remembering folktales told around village fires. Then she relaxed as in the soft blending of moon and firelight, she identified the three newcomers as men. She relaxed, but kept her hand on the hilt of her blade.

"Greetings," said one.

Forth nodded casually.

"Would you, perhaps, have some of that stew to spare?"

"That 'stew' is only of medicinal value, but you are welcome to share our fire."

The girl pursed her lips. Better, she supposed, to have the trio where they could keep an eye on them than lurking in the darkness. As they crouched by the warmth, the sound of jangling metal reached her ears; the strangers were armed, perhaps heavily. K'rilq liked this less and less.

"A fine child," observed one, nodding at her. "Your daughter? Mistress?"

K'rilq did not like how visible she obviously was in the nocturnal light. She would have preferred to be more of a mystery to these strangers.

"My apprentice," said the old man quietly.

"Is she for sale?" asked one quickly. His companions glared at him, indicating he had spoken out of turn. Or at least, too soon.

Forth laughed. "Sale implies ownership. How can I own a fellow being?" But, of course, he was speaking from the Mohz attitude, the Mohz sense of morality.

One of the newcomers grinned, the red glow playing evilly across his bearded features. "Then you have no claim to her?"

"No."

He stood. "Then we claim her for ourselves."

"I would not recommend that," the old man said evenly, still sitting cross-legged on the earth, his big hands at his side.

"Don't interfere and you won't get..." The sentence was interrupted by a cry of pain as the hand dragging his sword from its scabbard sprouted a tiny blade. He tore the knife from the back of his hand, redness trickling over his fingers, and spun to face K'rilq.

The girl's poniard was still at her side, but in the firelight they recognized the wristband on her left arm, and the tiny throwing knives sheathed there. One sheath was vacant.

Before they could replan, Forth unfolded his legs and stood, his medallion glittering. "Be on your way." His voice was menacing now, no longer neutral. "Or you'll have worse than a cut hand."

One of the three launched himself forward, a battle cry on his lips. Forth moved with such speed that the girl barely saw him reach inside his hip pocket, barely saw him throw his fist forward, barely saw the granules of dust fly from his fingers. The attacker screamed as blue flames momentarily enveloped his face. Then he dropped to his knees, clutching at his eyes, the sickening smell of scorched flesh tainting the evening air.

The two still on their feet dragged blades free from leather, the friction hissing like snakes. Forth bent and rose again instantly, his sword in hand. The Mohzian metal reflected the light in a subtly unnatural way that caused the two men to hesitate.

"Enough!"

Immediately a figure stepped from the bramble into the glow of moon and flame. K'rilq stepped back, startled. The newcomer was thin faced, dressed in a robe with jet hair slicked back with oil, his body adorned with earrings and necklaces, looking much as the girl would expect a sorcerer to look. Not at all like Forth.

The stranger raised his arms and a smile creased his thin lips. "Hold, friend," he said. "There has been a misunderstanding here." He stepped closer to the big man, dark eyes appraising the Mohz, then nodded, satisfied. "I'm not wrong, am I? You are Mohz."

Forth raised an eyebrow as he considered this question, then he gave a curt nod. "I am."

"I had heard you were all dead."

"You heard wrong."

"Apparently," he conceded, then smiled again. "But not very, I'll wager. Else, why would a member of the old race walk among us..." he hesitated, as if having difficulty finding the correct word, "...barbarians?"

Forth chose to leave that question unanswered. "I take it these creatures," he indicated their would-be assailants, "are yours?"

"My name is Al'tioo of the Mohz-guh-Bont and yes, these sorry fellows are in my employ." He folded his narrow hands across his stomach.

"I am vu Forthium-guh-tolt of the Mohz-guh-Ladequia," said Forth quietly, studying the sorcerer for a moment. At last, shaking his head slowly, he observed, "And you are no true Mohz."

"No," agreed Al'tioo amicably. "Hence the use of the term 'Bont', meaning, in your language, 'new'. It is not uncommon among human wizards to acknowledge the advances of your people in this small way."

"'Bont'," Forth said dryly, "is a prefix."

Al'tioo pursed his lips, his jaw shifting as though chewing something, then he shrugged. "Why quibble?" He stepped back.

"And what did these," Forth gestured at the others with a contemptuous flick of his wrist, "want with my companion?"

Al'tioo glanced at K'rilq, then at Forth. He shrugged. "A blood sacrifice."

Forth's lips pulled back from his teeth and he let out a snorted laugh. "Barbarians," he growled. "You are not Mohz at all. You prance around in gaudy finery, adopt names that are not yours by right, and practice obscene sorcery. You are pathetic, Al'tioo of the Mohz-guh-Tithuk."

Silence closed in around the camp then, like the fist of a giant, and though none of the others knew quite what 'Tithuk' meant, the human magus could hazard a guess. In the red glow of the fire, his face turned an even deeper scarlet.

"Blood sacrifices have a proven validity, Mohz," he said tightly.

"You are not worth a true Mohz's notice, barbarian." Forth started to turn his back.

"You are old, Mohz. Old and useless."

K'rilq was startled to hear her earlier thoughts echoed so boldly. Yet, though she had thought them with sympathy, Al'tioo spoke with such contempt that she struggled to resist the urge to bury her poniard in his breast.

"Your time has come and gone," continued the human wizard. "New ideas, new magicks, have supplanted the old. Blood buys the obedience of other worldly demons."

"A true Mohz," returned Forth, turning upon the other man, "does not buy obedience."

Al'tioo threw back his head and laughed. "You are the pathetic one, Mohz. Your race is dead and you will be too, one day. Why? Because the world has marched forward and left you and your petty sorceries behind."

The old man's jaw shifted for a tense moment, then he straightened and secured his cloak more thoroughly about his shoulders. "Get your things together, K'rilq," he rumbled quietly. "We are leaving this tainted place."

"No," said Al'tioo, not unpleasantly. "Out of deference to your race, Mohz, I had intended to let you both go. But now," he shrugged, "I still need a blood sacrifice." His eyes focused on K'rilq.

"Try to detain us..." began Forth menacingly.

Without even glancing at him, the younger man said, "My magicks are more than a match for yours, old man."

"Prove it."

Al'tioo turned, smiling, and suddenly, without warning, spheres of



golden light stabbed from his hands, scorching the Mohz's vest and knocking him to the ground.

K'rilq cried out, but already her companion was struggling to his feet.

Al'tioo laughed. But a second assault of golden light was interrupted by a crest of earth rising wave-like between the two. Then, still like some thick, dark wave, it crashed into Al'tioo, wiping the laughter from his lips.

Forth gained his feet, his movements slow, his breathing heavy. He was not, after all, a young man.

Al'tioo lay upon the ground, perched on his elbows, his robe soiled by the dirt that had retreated back to its earthen home. "Shall I prove the superiority of 'barbarian' magicks, Mohz?"

K'rilq narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"We will be here a very long time, then, since it is impossible to prove a falsehood." Forth turned to K'rilq and said, "Why haven't you gathered our things?"

She made a face at him. Though she admired his bravado, enough was enough. This was not over yet.

Al'tioo rose lazily, then raised his arms above his head and, surprisingly, opened his mouth and howled like a great blast of wind. It was a long oscillating note he held, vibrating as though almost beyond his range. It was such a high, grating sound that K'rilq cupped her hands over her ears in a vain attempt to block the piercing noise.

Something cracked, like the snap of thunder, though the sky was clear.

Al'tioo clawed at the air, his fingers carving invisible runes before him.

Something rumbled, shaking the ground like a minor tremor.

Even vu Forthium-gu-tolt, last of the Mohz, looked momentarily unsure. For an instant, K'rilq thought she detected a look of fear on his haggard features. Then it was gone and she could not be sure.

And then the air split just above the ground, a jagged wound in the belly of reality, and a rush of air extinguished the fire. The split spread out and round until it was as wide as a broad doorway. K'rilq gasped as she saw, through this portal, another landscape, an alien one. The parched ground was purple and the sky a swirling morass of pinks and reds. The trees, if trees they were, were globes of purest white, hugging the ground at sporadic intervals.

It took her a moment for her to realize that Al'tioo had ceased his howling. For some reason, that chilled her most of all.

"And now, Mohz," he shouted, "you shall see first hand 'barbarian' magicks. Not just your companion, but you as well, shall serve as a blood sacrifice to my other worldly allies."

And they came.

Pouring from the mouth, the tear in the realities, they came, two score at least. Hissing and rasping, stumbling awkwardly due to the alien gravity. They were shaped, vaguely, like tall men, but they were not men. They had skin like reptiles, but they were not reptiles. Their only clothing was jewelry, necklaces, armbands and nothing more. They glistened in the moonlight and the stench that wafted over K'rilq made her eyes water and bile rise in her throat. She could tell by the muscles that rose and slid beneath their skins that any one of the creatures alone could have fought and killed a dozen men.

She drew her poniard nonetheless.

Al'tioo pointed at her and mumbled something in a garbled, hissing voice.

The creatures stumbled toward her, hissing, stinking, their crystal eyes unfathomable. K'rilq crouched, muscles tensing, searching for a soft underbelly. These beings, though, seemed not to possess one.

Forth stepped between her and the foremost of the creatures.

She yelled at him to get back, to grab his sword, anything. He ignored her.

Al'tioo roared with laughter.

Then the old mage drew his medallion from about his neck and held it out, allowing moonlight to play off its finely etched patterns. It spun quietly around and the creatures stumbled to a halt. Silence returned to the little camp as they studied the rotating object. The first one stepped forward and reached out with a gnarled, savage-looking claw to tap the medallion gently. Then a big paw closed about it and the creature slowly, and seemingly with great effort, put the medallion against its chest, next to its own necklace.

K'rilq sucked in cool air as she realized that the creature wore an identical medallion. The comparison complete, the being held out the disk and Forth took it. Then the bulky creature stepped back and regarded him for a long moment.

Nervously, Al'tioo began hissing orders. He was ignored.

The creature rasped something unintelligible.

Forth responded in kind.

The creature said something again.

Forth merely nodded.

That was all. Almost as one, the creatures slowly, lumberingly, turned from the older man and his companion and moved instead toward Al'tioo and his henchmen. The human mage hissed at the creatures, but they did not heed him. Golden bolts of energy launched from his fingertips bounced harmlessly off their oily skins. The bravest of the warriors leapt forward, swinging a broadsword. The blade shattered on a scaled shoulder and the man's skull followed next, crushed

beneath a massive hand.

Then Al'tioo and his fellows broke and ran and K'rilq learned that the creatures were built most definitely for speed. In seconds they had the wizard and his helpers, including the dead one, and dragged them screaming and writhing through the portal. None of the creatures looked back.

With a clap of thunder and a rush of imploding air, the portal ceased to be.

The girl pulled her cape about herself, feeling a chill that was not simply in the air. After a suitable silence, she whispered, "What happened?"

"Mohz alliances date back millennia," he said not looking at her. "And the old races have long memories, and an even longer sense of obligation. Al'tioo, a barbarian, could not understand the overriding pull of such loyalty." He shrugged as he lay himself upon the ground. "His mistake."

With that he slept. And K'rilq watched over him as he slept but, though he was an old man, she did not watch him as closely. She no longer saw the need.

## THORVAL'S VICTORY

D. Sandy Nielsen

Thorval staggered.

The blow had been delivered hard and heavy. His ears rang. His vision blurred. True, he had deflected the sharp cutting edge of the weighty sword with his round shield, the wood splintering underneath the iron bracing, but the flat of the blade had whacked exacting on the steel straps of his hardened leather helmet. His exhaustion from the battle, coupled with numerous free flowing wounds, left him light of head. His arm dragged down to the bloodied earth. His legs were flaccid.

Strange. Thorval was bored. Thorval was tired. Thorval was mad. Not a good combination for a man who thought as Thorval had inclinations to.

Frithuwald saw his chance. The cursed Dane had the fortune to miss his death blow the last time but he would not do so now. Though the bones within Frithuwald's arm pealed like a temple bell's resonance, he could support the sword properly with help from the other hand. The Viking was in far worse shape than he, especially after what should have been his irrevocable stroke. Now he would end this miserable intruder's life. Frithuwald discarded his shield and hefted the massive battle sword with both hands, raised it far above his head and began his deliberate march towards his tottering foeman. It would be unfortunately swift

with no chance for a long, painful, dragged out death, one that would give Frithuwald the pleasure he craved.

Bored, tired and mad. Enough was enough. Thorval wiped the blood from his eyes with the back of his hand and his muscles screamed at him to stop even this little exertion. He looked to the petty king Frithuwald and saw the cruel gleam in his ferret eyes, his sword held behind his head with both hands. This pompous, paltry, king who claimed that this part of the Danelaw was his. He had paid the Danegeld, and that only entitled him to live in peace. There was no claim to the land. This was understood. And now this bastard king had marched in and attacked innocent settlers from the Dane Mark, across the sea.

Thorval snapped. His vision was misted by crimson, but it was not from the blood he had wiped away. It was from the Red Rage. And the Red Rage descended quicker than one of the Thunder God's lightning bolts. It burnt and devoured swifter than any of Surt's fires. The fatigue vanished from Thorval's muscles, instantly replaced by an energy that glowed like a smithy's kiln. His sandalled feet barely touched the ground as he flew at Frithuwald. His shield was discarded and his sword, Undskyld, was a flash of ruby light as it whistled through the rank air.

Frithuwald stopped mid-stride. His face was a grotesque mask of shock. His arms, once held high, now fell behind his back, to the dust, severed at the shoulders. The sword struck point first into the earth, the hands still clutched tight to the hilt. His head teetered for a moment, then it too plunged earthwards, and rolled between Thorval's feet. Frithuwald's headless, armless, body surprisingly managed to hold upright for several seconds, till it too tumbled forward.

Thorval dodged back to avoid the falling cadaver, what there was left, its neck a fountain of scarlet spurts. Spinning on the balls of his feet he spotted his enemy's head, retrieved it, and cut the thong that held Frithuwald's helmet to his jaw. He stood and raised his arms, his sword in one, the bloodied head of Frithuwald swaying by the hair in his other. Thorval bellowed like a troll in heat.

The melee halted with a loud clap of silence.

Quiet rung all ears.

Both Saxon and Dane arrested their furies to stare at the creature that was capable of such a shriek. The Saxons beheld the head of their king dangling from Thorval's fist. Remove the head and the body dies. The Saxons lost all heart and fled whence they had come. The Vikings roared their cry of victory to Thorval till it shook the Vault of Asgaard, and the All-Father, with all Aesir and Vanir in attendance, peered down to see what had occurred to cause such a din.

Let them look, deities or mortals.

Thorval collapsed in a dead faint, head and sword still clenched in his hand.

"Boy! Hey, boy! Wake up!"

Thorval felt the thick calloused fingers tousling the top of his shaggy blond mane. "What?"

"Hold on. That's my question. What. What were you thinking of just now? You were so far away."

Thorval looked up at his grandfather's, Thorval Ancient's, pale blue eyes. "I had been watching you and father."

"So."

"It made me think."

Thorval Ancient pushed against young Thorval's forehead causing his already squatting form to fall back to a sitting position, his butt landing on the overturned earth of the fresh tilled soil. Thorval Ancient plopped down beside him and placing his feet in the furrow, let warmth that had been absorbed from the sun by the sandy loam spread through his body before saying, "And what thoughts crossed your mind while observing your father and me when you should have been working?"

Young Thorval leaned forward and picked up a dried clump of earth and crumpled it beneath his fingers. He shaded his eyes against the sun and looked to his grandfather. "You and father don't have to come out and work in the fields."

"Yah."

"You have more than enough thralls to do all the work."

Young Thorval could tell that his grandfather was enjoying leading the conversation on by the mischievous glint in his eye. It was, after all, something of a family trait. The glow lit in young Thorval's eyes as he stated defiantly, "And I don't have to come out and work in the fields either."

Thorval Ancient raised his head and closed his eyes as he sniffed in a breath of salt air that had blown in from the Roskilde Fjord. "How many summers have passed with you? Eleven?"

"Twelve," he asserted.

"In all those times that you've come out to the fields with us, I can't recall you ever complaining. You've seldom snuck off to play with your friends."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

Young Thorval fidgeted uncomfortably and shifted his position. With his hands he brushed down the hair that had been tousled by his grandfather, leaving dirty streaks. "Well. It's just that I was watching you and Far plant the apple saplings."

"Yah."

He blurted out the words, "You're like a couple of old crones fussing

over a newborn."

Thorval Ancient leaned back his head to look at him and in between chuckles said, "So?"

Young Thorval sat upright and spread his arms wide, intensely vociferating, "But you're warriors, Vikings. You've both sailed all the seas of Midgaard."

Thorval the Elder sauntered over to his son and father and settled down beside them in the soft loam. "What's all the excitement this time?" He was used to his father's devious way of egging on his son to get his mind working. He had experienced it often enough himself while growing up.

"Your son tells me we shouldn't be out working the land. It is labour only fit for thralls and serfs. Not for proud Viking warriors, such as we are."

"It would appear I recall a similar exchange from years ago," Thorval the Elder mused out loud.

The Ancient one shrugged, innocently.

"But, Far!" Young Thorval exclaimed to his father, "I've heard the tales told around the hearth of your's and the Far Far's voyages on longships. Sailing the drakkars to every land known, and some that were not. Many tales I've listened to late at night when everyone thought I had long since fallen asleep in my berth. I've heard the laughter. I've heard the boasting. I've heard of the many victories."

The two older Thorvals exchanged glances. Both had the glint. A glint that many claimed gave them ancestry leading back to Loki, the Trickster.

"And we don't deserve to do with our own land as we will, after all we've achieved?" Thorval the Elder questioned his son.

"Ney. I didn't say that. It's just that..."

"Yah."

"It's just that I don't think I've ever seen you or Far-Far look happier than when you're out playing with your trees and plants." He looked to his grandfather. "You get up every morning at dawn's glimmering to go out and check the fields of grain to see if they have grown any overnight. Even when I've watched the two of you drinking ale and laughing with comrades about the days when you roved the waves, I've still never seen you more truly joyous than when you're out in the dirt." Young Thorval stopped and waited expectantly for an answer that would quell his curiosity.

"You know something, son," Thorval the Elder stated flatly, "you're quite right."

"You mean you'd rather have dirt in your nails than foeman's blood on your sword."

"Of course," both replied quickly.

"But your voyages, your exploits," he stammered exasperatedly. "You-

you-your victories." He recaptured stability of voice and exclaimed, "Your victories!"

Thorval Ancient leaned in towards his grandson and raised a forefinger to emphasize his point. "There is always the final victory."

He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders in incomprehension. His father answered.

"The final victory is to return home and sow the fields."

"Your last conquest is to plant grass? That's crazy."

"Think before you speak, son. Who was it that begged me for his own small plot of land so he could try growing his own vegetables?"

Thorval Ancient added, "And how is it that you see me out checking the grain every morning. Could it be from your own little garden that you are in fact checking?"

"That's wholly different," he explained slowly so that they could understand, "I'm just a young kid."

The older Thorvals chortled.

"What of the Valhall?"

"What of it?" Thorval the Elder countered.

"What of dying in battle with sword in hand to be fetched by the Valkyries?"

"I'm too old for battle now, boy," the grandfather answered. "And I have every intention of going to Frej's realm of Folkevanger. As I've often said, I've no desire to be hauled off to the Valhall and be a pawn in the All-Father's twisted games."

Young Thorval stood and placed his hands on his hips. He was wholly piqued. "Then why bother with the adventures at all? Why not just stay home?"

The two elders becalmed.

"The harder question," the father declared.

"The more difficult answer," the Ancient clarified.

Thorval the Elder answered his son, as his father had done for him so many years past. "Cattle die. Sheep die. Crops die. Kin die." He paused. "You too, my son, will die. The only thing that will live forever are the tales of our deeds."

"So did Odin steal the mead of poetry, so that the scalds could recount our exploits," Thorval Ancient continued, "so that our children, and our children's children would remember us in the sagas and eddas. Only in the tales our offspring tell, will our memory live forever."

"Thorval! Wake up. It's alright.

Thorval opened his blood streaked pupils to the sight of Odd Bud's

broad, bearded face over top of him. His skull felt like old Red-Beard's hammer, Miolnar, had used his head as an anvil to beat out a new sword. His body felt like Hel had her deadening talons struck deep into his flesh. "Odd?" His eyes closed.

"You killed him. We're all safe now. You were victorious." Odd pried Thorval's sword from his still clenched fingers and resheathed it. He pried free Frithurwald's head and tossed it at Gruntle who caught it with a grunt and tucked it away in a burlap sack. He lifted Thorval in his tree trunk arms as one might carry a bride or a child. Odd Bud carried him towards the waiting longship.

Thorval opened his eyes again. "Odd," he croaked past a thickly parched tongue.

"Yah?"

"Cattle die."

"No cattle, Thorval. But we butchered many Saxons like fattened calves."

"Sheep die."

"No sheep died, yet the bastards squealed like lambs led to the slaughter."

"Crops die."

"Crops? No. No crops?" He must be delirious, thought Odd, as he marched down the rocky incline to the waiting ship, Swan Song, that had miraculously appeared, as it always did.

"Kin die."

"Yah. Many men. Good Vikings all of them. Brave."

"You too will die, my friend."

"Not today. Not after you killed Frithurwald. Not after you decapitated him, and sliced off both arms while doing it. The bards and scalds will be making up epic poems about that one. Your deed this day will be sung in every court from Miklegaard to Iceland, and even beyond to Markland. You did it. Victory."

"Victory," he barely rasped. "Yah, Thorval thought, I did. I've lived again, so there was still time for the last conquest. Still time to sow the final victory. He gazed up at the prow of the white longship and saw the swan figurehead. Undoubtedly, after his triumph, his wounds would be tended to by both Inger She-Bear and the tawny Maria Drift-Anchor.

Thorval closed his eyes and slipped once more into unconsciousness.

He sat on the warm tilled loam with his father and grandfather. All were smiling.

He held seeds in his hand.



## THE TRANSMUTATION OF RHAZES

Jeff Carter

Now came the forming of the black crow, for the pale citron had been ousted, and the magnificent green lion had roared. Just a few stages more, and Rhazes would know if his long search was over. The work would have to be done hastily, however, because the captain was in an urgent hurry to cast off ship and miss the monsoon rains.

Rhazes explained the procedure to his two companions standing in the shadows of the dimly lit, one room workshop, the veiled Sarasvati, the lovely maiden, whom he hoped the Caliph would allow to be his bride, and Captain Ibn al-Wardi himself.

"Now we will kill the copper in the purifying fires of Hades," said Rhazes. His dark hair, dark eyes and black robes added to the gloom.

Sara handed the frothing beaker to the alchemist. He poured its contents, a gelatinous blue precipitate called the peacock's tail, into the crucible.

Al-Wardi pulled at his black beard and watched with great consternation. His heart was more agitated than the babbling cauldron in the centre of the room. He was in a great hurry to leave Serendib, but the alchemist, who just happened to be Vizier to Caliph Haroun ar Raschid, insisted on staying until his worthless experiment was completed.

Al-Wardi's forty-five years had taught him to be wary of anyone who called himself an alchemist, especially one whose descent was not Persian but infidel Christian Syrian. Most were charlatans and the rest were fools, trifling with dangerous power that would ultimately best them. "What do you mean, you're going to kill the copper?" he asked, and then his eyes wandered over the small makeshift laboratory. How would they ever pack all this junk up in time to leave by midnight?

The hut was a cluttered jungle of earthen jars, flasks, beakers, assorted mystical objects and various other instruments made for alchemical use: the kerotakis, the alembic, the two-armed pelican, the gripe's egg. Shelves were filled with various containers labelled 'man's hair' or 'powdered bones'. Skulls hung from the wall and ancient tomes littered the room. On a stand stood a huge volume entitled THE BOOK OF THE SECRET OF SECRETS.

Al-Wardi rubbed his nose and eyes. It didn't help that the room stank of smoke and chemicals.

With metal tongs Rhazes placed the crucible into the athanor while Sara



answered al-Wardi. "The work parallels life, death and resurrection," she said. "As monks strive for the soul's perfection, adepts strive for the perfect metal, lustrous gold unbound by corruptible rust. As men attain perfection by passing through trials and death, we kill the metal and its impurities in the fiery furnace. Then we revive it so that it too will then be perfect." She looked at Rhazes. "Did I say that well?"

Rhazes smiled. "Very good," he said. "You have learned quickly and well." He motioned for al-Wardi, who stepped forward to squeeze the furnace bellows. While the captain enraged the fire, Rhazes gazed upon the lithe figure of the young Sri Lankan, her long dark hair flowing over her bare brown shoulders. Her beautiful brown eyes returned the gaze.

For twenty years of the adept's thirty-five he had searched for the philosopher's stone, that powerful element that made a change complete and permanent, finalizing the shifting of shapes. With al-Wardi and his crew, he had travelled more than eight thousand miles aboard the Roc from Basra throughout the East Indies, to the fabled lands of al-Sin and now to their port of call on Serendib (where he had found, perhaps, the stone and also Sarasvati) to seek out the alchemists of those lands, to collect the lore and wisdom of the ancient art, to look for some clue that would lead him to his goal. So far, no success. But he had made some impressive discoveries, and perhaps tonight would be the night. The gold would remain gold and his dreams would be fulfilled.

Surely it was like a thorny red rose, this work of the adept, beautiful and mystifying, but extremely difficult. Sara, too, was like the rose, but without the thorns. What could the philosopher's stone give that she could not? Gold? Long life? What would even everlasting life be without her? Now, having met her, Rhazes knew he could not live without her.

He removed the crucible from the fireball heat. The three crowded together to look upon the compound, now blackened into what was called "the black crow". "It is dead," Rhazes said. "The sulphur has been freed and has wafted up to heaven. Now we resurrect the corpse!"

"How long will this take, sorcerer?" al-Wardi scowled. "I insist that we be on our journey! The welfare of my men is at stake!"

"The green dragon must first eat the sun and the beautiful plumed swan shall appear!" Rhazes looked to Sara. Sometimes, being a novice, she took these things literally. Perhaps even now she was beholding visions of a green leviathan, its scales reflecting brilliant rays, spreading its wings and engulfing the golden sun. He smiled. "Not really," he said to her. "It's just a metaphor." And then to al-Wardi, "Not long, I promise."

He transferred via spatula the black calx to a plate, which he brought to a beaker containing dragon's blood. He dumped the burnt powder into the acid,

which indeed devoured the black substance. "Quickly," he said, "the copper shavings!"

Sara retrieved a glass jar from the top shelf, which she handed to Rhazes. The reaction began almost immediately after he added the shavings. A white compound appeared. "Behold the plumed swan!" Rhazes said and the two looked on. "Be careful. It's highly poisonous."

Rhazes continued. "We have been advancing the prima materia through the scale of virtues, each signified by a different colour. Now, before the compound oxidizes, we must out of the sanguis agni... (Rhazes' eyes went to Sara's full red lips) "and soon we shall see gold!"

Rhazes poured the solution into a matrass, which he placed into the athanor. As he worked the bellows furiously, the furnace blazed with crackling heat casting a yellow glare on their hands and faces. Rhazes took it out just once. "See," he said, "it's red! We are on our way, but we must be careful not to contaminate the compound with sulphur."

"And now we are proceeding to the final stage of projection?" Sara asked.

"Correct," Rhazes said, as he reached into his pouch and sprinkled a substance he believed to be the stone onto the sanguis agni and returned the compound to the fire. Again he worked the bellows and the fire glowed white hot.

He removed the crucible. "Quickly, come and see. The transmutation is complete."

The nugget cooled and al-Wardi gasped. Gold! His many travels told him that without a doubt it was gold! "Incredible!" he said. But then he frowned. "Wait! What is happening?"

"Unfortunately, I have never been able to achieve fixation," said Rhazes.

"What do you mean?" asked al-Wardi.

"It does not last. It reverts back to its former state within moments."

Sadly, it was true. The once gold nugget was again obviously copper. "Bah! I have wasted my time on a charlatan's foolishness!" al-Wardi said.

Rhazes suddenly looked very weary. He had thought that surely this time would be the charm. He rubbed his beard. "I must not have added enough of the stone. Perhaps now if I..."

"No! Absolutely not!" shouted al-Wardi. "We leave within the hour. Pack your things and get on board or I swear by Allah I will leave you, Vizier or not!" He stalked from the hut and slammed the door.

Rhazes looked to Sara. At least now he had her to comfort him in his failures.

The sun was near dawn but the clouds would hide its rising. Al-Wardi

stood on the deck, watching the approaching storm. The Roc had taken to sea a few hours after midnight and now Serendib was far behind. He would miss the peaceful island and its beautiful people. And Adam's Peak, the tallest mountain in the world where, Islamic legend said, the first man was expelled from Eden, was indeed breathtaking. But the actions he had taken were to save the lives of his crew.

Too many had been lost already on this ten month voyage. Storms and scurvy had reduced those on board to fifteen men, three eunuch servants who knew nothing of sailing, eight women (some really only children) and one sorcerer.

One sorcerer who had brought them to their doom, for now the storm was upon them. An extra day's journey might have saved them.

An endless march of purple black clouds now tumbled toward and streamed past the ship in the violent, boiling sky. Lightning crackled and branched forth its white hot rivulets. The thunderclap boomed above al-Wardi's head. The fierce tempest winds blew at him from straight on, gale force.

As the rains began the ship heeled underneath the force of the windstorm, allowing the sea to flood through the lee scuppers and wash across the deck. Al-Wardi heard a thunderous crashing from below and realized that his cargo, sandalwood from Salahat, aloe wood from Camari where it grows best and peppercorns dried in the sun on the lush coast of Malabar, had broken loose and toppled across the ship.

Ship timbers screamed above the sound of the wind's fury. The helmsman lost control and the ship swung broadside into the wind. Shouting turbaned mariners clad only in loincloths and exhilarated by the danger burst from below and raced to their stations. Al-Wardi shouted his orders.

He gritted his teeth and set his chin to the wind. He was Ibn al-Wardi, who had sailed over every sea upon which the rays of the golden sun had touched, who had endured the attack of pirates, shipwreck and cannibal savages in his thirty odd years of sea travel. He had always found a way to survive. And he would do it again whatever it took.

Fists clenched the tiller and straining arms turned the rudder until the bow was brought over into the wind. The main and mizzen sheets were slackened and the ship slowly began to straighten up.

The hard driving rain however, continued and the winds howled in awesome rage, shredding two of the sails, a jib and a mizzen. The rigging sighed and then with a booming crack the mainsail snapped. A sailor fell to his knees to pray.

Al-Wardi opened his eyes wide in wonder. Out upon the seas, the clouds were swirling, chasing one another around and around, now dipping funnel-shaped down into the water. But this was no ordinary water spout. This one was ablaze with fire. He called to one sailor, "Get Rhazes on deck and get him now!"

The pillar of fire stood upon the ocean waters about three miles away. Al-Wardi shivered. Out there lurked a vast, shapeless wraith, a horror ungrasped by the mind, a monster born of impenetrable night. Al-Wardi knew this in his heart.

Rhazes came on deck. He had removed his black robes and was clothed only in black trousers, sword at his side. The captain turned angrily to him. "Do you see what your delay has cost us?" He motioned to the broken mast and tattered sails. Then he pointed to the flaming apparition. "What do you make of that?"

Rhazes shook his head in dismay. "I would that we were facing a fleet of pirates who would sell us into slavery."

"What do you mean, alchemist?"

"We are beholding the signs of the djinn."

Al-Wardi felt his heart melt.

Then came a moaning sound. The captain and the adept turned. Sarasvati had come on deck. Her beautiful brown eyes were frozen in a terrified stare.

All on deck beheld in horror as a giant pair of yellow eyes replaced the funnel and glared at the ship. A sorcerous light shone upon Sara, who thrashed in agony to get away but the abomination's sorcery held her fast. Then a voice spoke from no mouth, a low inhuman growl that pierced the flesh and obscenely caressed the heart. Ibn al-Wardi put his hands to his ears; Rhazes grimaced and endured.

"Hear and heed these words, O mortal men!" roared the djinn. "This woman have I chosen for my bride. I, Abu Maridim, Efrit of the Highest Order, will take a wife!"

"Never!" shouted al-Wardi. "These women are meant for the imperial seraglio of the Caliph of Baghdad himself!"

He was beneath the djinn's notice, who continued: "Long have I waited and longed for you, O beloved one! Long have I watched you from afar, barred from your land by ancient sorcery, waiting for the moment to come to fruition. At last the harvest is come! Prepare your body and soul for me, O princess! Soon, I will come and you will serve me and love me!"

"Take the form of a man and fight, you spawn of hell!" shouted al-Wardi.

Rhazes grabbed his shoulder. "Be quiet! You don't know what you're dealing with!" A fireball fell from the sky and incinerated three sailors in a burst of searing heat.

The voice spoke again. "Adorn her as my bride, for in just one hour I come."

The voice died, and Rhazes raced to comfort Sara, who had begun to weep uncontrollably. Al-Wardi looked at Rhazes. "So, vizier, what is your counsel?"

"You're not going to turn her over to that monster, are you?"

"What choice do we have?" asked al-Wardi.

Sara was shivering with fear. Rhazes' heart ached for her, wanted to save her somehow from this monstrous fate but to resist the djinn would surely be the death of all of them.

"Djinn are made just below angels and devils," he said. "They are powerful shape-shifters, able to take the form of a human, of animals, and especially snakes. They can dwell in non-living objects. Needless to say, they are wicked and ruthless."

"Can they be killed?"

"Yes, but it would be foolish to confront him in man to man combat. He will surely take the form of one more powerful than yourself. Djinn can be overcome only by trickery or by sorcery."

"So, can you not conjure against him?"

Rhazes sighed. "I am an alchemist, not a sorcerer as you like to call me. The little magic I know pertains to my science. It has nothing to do with battling supernatural beings."

Al-Wardi looked at the maiden. "I can't endanger the entire voyage for the sake of one wench. Take her below and adorn her as the djinn commanded."

"You're mad!" Rhazes shouted. "How could you do such a thing?"

Al-Wardi pulled his scimitar and touched it to Rhazes' chest. "Do you want us all to be burnt to a crisp? We have no choice but to surrender her."

"Careful," Rhazes said. "I learned the ways of the sword before I learned alchemy."

Sara stopped her sobbing and dabbed at her eyes with her blouse. "Al-Wardi is right," she said. "Better that I should go than all of us die."

Rhazes looked to Sara, dumbfounded.

"You see?" al-Wardi said. "This is for the best."

Rhazes glared at the captain. "I will see to her adornment," he said in a low voice.

While the remaining sailors knelt upon the deck, sewing together the lacerated sails, Sarasvati bathed in luminous seawater in the lavatory that hung over the stern. Phosphorous flecks of plankton glowed eerily upon her smooth brown skin.

She was brought below deck where her hair was braided, her eyes, face and lips were applied with cosmetics and she was clothed in silk trousers and blouse. She was adorned with earrings and bracelets and the diamonds, emeralds and rubies that had been brought aboard in her homeland. Her robes glittered with precious

stones. Her radiance made Rhazes heartsick.

After an hour had lapsed and no more, the sea began to churn and the winds to blow. A great light flew over the waters from the east, transformed into an enormous winged creature which landed on the ship's deck and took on a somewhat human appearance.

The efrit was an animal man with a massive blue body and head, shaved except for a ponytail of hair. The nails of his hands were like the claws of some fierce predatory bird. Ibn al-Wardi heard that voice again inside his heart, broadcast so everyone could be aware of the triumph of the man-beast. "Bring forth my bride," it said, "and we will unite in matrimony."

Rhazes whispered to al-Wardi. "Insist at least that he not kiss her until the ceremony can be performed," he said. "She deserves at least that dignity."

Sarasvati was brought from below, heart-wrenching in her beauty. She walked on her own to the djinn who towered over her slim figure. His yellow eyes smirked, his mouth upturned in a horrible, gloating smile. His teeth were long and sharp. "Come and kiss your king," he said.

"No!" Ibn al-Wardi shouted. "The girl shall be treated with dignity! The veil shall not be removed until the marriage vows are given!" He looked at Rhazes, who hesitantly nodded. The demon jerked his head toward Ibn al-Wardi, his face contorted with contempt.

"I bow to no god, no man, no law or tradition. I am Abu-Maridim and I will do what I please and have what I want!" He grabbed the girl and forced his mouth upon hers. Then he threw her to the deck.

Immediately, Rhazes drew his sword and lunged at the demon, who was just able to draw his own scimitar and fend off the blow, pushing Rhazes off of him.

The two figures glared at each other and then a guttural growl emanated from the massive chest of the djinn. As the rage and fury built, the sound rose to a shrieking howl. "What is this? By Shaitan! I cannot change shapes!" he bellowed. "You've tricked me, you worthless worm! You've ensorcelled me!"

The djinn roared again as he leaped, his scimitar sweeping a lethal arc. Rhazes side-stepped the blade, but was caught in the head by a blow from the djinn's giant fist.

His vision blurred and he staggered but slammed his sword back toward the djinn. The two swords clashed with sparks of blue fire. Rhazes' ears rang.

Swiftly, he turned and thrust with all his might. The sharp point slashed through the bones of the giant, and it dropped dead at Rhazes' feet. It was too late, though. The djinn had sliced his blade into Rhazes' side, cutting almost to the backbone.

Rhazes was standing upright. He was losing blood quickly and now felt



sick and very weary. The clouds had vanished with the death of the djinn, and now the glare of the noonday sun blinded him. His head began to ache. He looked at Ibn al-Wardi, who now seemed very strange and far away, and then into the face of Sarasvati, sweet Sara, who had rushed to his side and was trying to hold him up. Her face was still beautiful, and strangely comforting at this time. He took a few steps and then collapsed to the floor of the deck.

Ibn al-Wardi was barking orders for a doctor, but then realized that Rhazes was the only doctor on board, he knelt beside the alchemist. "Hang on, old friend. We're going to patch you up and you're going to make it."

"Too late...too deep..." Rhazes mumbled.

"How did you do it? How did you trick the djinn?"

"The lipstick. Sara's lipstick."

"The lipstick?"

"I mixed it with the philosopher's stone."

Ibn al-Wardi shook his head, still not understanding.

"The stone makes change permanent. When the compound touched his lips, it kept him from shifting shapes."

Thoughts about the soul's perfection and the trials of men came back to the captain. Rhazes had passed through his stages, and al-Wardi saw that a new virtue had been ousted, courage.

"You can't be dying," said Sara.

"I am," said Rhazes. "But do not weep, Sara. Remember my act of love for you. I have lived, and I will die, but just like the gold, I will have resurrection."

"I see now," said al-Wardi. "I see. I've seen your courage out and now I see the final virtue, sacrifice out of love."

"No greater love does a man have," said Rhazes in his last breath. His life passed from him.

Sara was weeping again, saved from separation but having to endure it once again. Al-Wardi stood up, and put his arm around her. "We can do nothing now, fair lady, except await his resurrection."

## MARTYR'S PLUNGE

David Laderoute

Eloran watched the departing soldiers and thought about the dream. Beside her, Meliar's whisper was taut with fear. "Matron, what are we going to do?"

Eloran turned and regarded the other woman. As Matron, Eloran had the sight, the Mother's deepest gift; she could project it, share it, and seek to smooth away Meliar's brooding fear. But she rejected the idea even as it occurred. Sharing the sight with Meliar would only diminish her strength. And then there was the rest of the sisterhood.

Eloran sighed. Mother, I'm too old for this. I just don't have that kind of strength anymore. Unless, of course, you're willing to grant it to me.

The soldiers rounded a bend in the road, only a dust-cloud marking their passage. The jingle of their harness lingered a bit longer, then it, too, faded into the breeze. And that was it. No answers, no insights, just the rise and fall of the wind.

Very well, Mother. Yours is the wisdom. She turned back to Meliar and met the woman's eyes. "You are eldest sister of the order, Meliar. Before we do anything, you must find peace within yourself."

It worked. After a moment, Meliar took a deep breath, hugged her arms across her chest, and nodded. "I'm sorry, Matron. The soldiers' news unnerved me, and L..."

Eloran nodded. "It's all right." She glanced back at the closed gate of the sanctuary. "News that the king's army has been unable to stop these northern barbarians, these Keldi, will certainly do more than just unnerve the rest of the sisterhood. So our first task is to avoid a panic."

Meliar nodded. "Certainly, Matron. But we must tell them something."

Eloran didn't answer. Instead, she stared at the sanctuary's ancient ivy-covered stonework, where it was washed by the muddy waters of the River Esengist. Hazy fragments of the dream rose from the restless swirls of water, shimmered, finally coalesced.

Terrified, Eloran watched as a vast, choking darkness rose, looming over her, clutching at her with writhing, malignant coils, but instead of fleeing, she rushed forward, embracing it and then she was falling, and the darkness was falling with her.

"Matron?"

Eloran started, and the image shattered into sun-dappled eddies. She straightened. "Meliar," she said, her eyes still on the river, "I must leave it up to you. I want you to take the other sisters away from here, into the eastern hills. I have other things to attend to."

Meliar's eyes widened. "As you wish, Matron, but please, forgive me for asking what do you mean to do?"

"I'm not sure." She finally looked at Meliar. "You must move the sisters no later than three days from now. I should return before then. If not, then I will find you."

"Matron, where?"

But Eloran was already walking away.

Eloran sat down on a fallen tree, placed her pack and cane down beside her, and tried to regain her breath. Only half a day's journey north of the sanctuary, and already she was bone-weary.

"Like I told you, Mother, I'm too old to be doing this," she muttered, unpacking her water flask.

After a drink, she relaxed, letting the warm sun shafting through the forest canopy play across her face. Once again, she tried casting about with her Sight. The life of the forest jumped into stark clarity, from the deep, ponderous presence of the trees to the flickering vitality of the insects. But there was something else: a discordant note of alarm, carried by wind and root and bough. Distant echoes of sound and smell, acrid and sharp, from the north. Fire and steel had come to the forest.

Eloran levered herself to her feet. Reflexively, she looked northward, but could see nothing but trees and, off to her left her guide, the Esengist. She had no way of telling how far away the clamour she had Seen was. Certainly more than a day's journey, and probably more than two. Ignoring fiercely protesting muscles, she slung her pack over her shoulder and set off, a new sense of urgency impelling her.

By the end of the day, however, the jagged images scraping against her sight seemed no nearer, while she was utterly exhausted. She brooded on her options over a cheerless supper. She could continue floundering northward through the woods, near the end of her strength. Or she could head eastward towards the road that ran south from Fieren. That would mean easier going, but would take her well out of her way. Or, she could seek help.

She sighed. Only once, long ago, had she deliberately sought a direct favour of the Mother and, to this day, she wasn't sure whether her call had been truly answered or not. But, she was the Matron, blessed with the sight. And if she indeed sensed the Mother's purpose by heeding the dream and undertaking this journey, then surely she had the right to at least ask for the Mother's boon now.

She repacked her things, then settled down in the damp moss under a spreading oak. For a while, she just relaxed and contemplated the deepening twilight. Then she took a deep breath, and extended her sight once again. She didn't actively petition the Mother in any way, but simply waited for a sign, a vision anything.

As she waited, she slept. And as she slept, she dreamed.

She was falling.

Eloran jolted awake, blinking and disoriented. A light blinded her, warm and red. Instinctively, she raised her hands in the Mother's sign. But as soon as she moved, pain lanced through her cramped shoulders. The light came into focus, resolving itself into the rising sun. She had slept the entire night and there had been no visions, no sendings, only the dream again. With a groan, she rested her head

back against the tree. Perhaps this was all wrong, and she had misunderstood the Mother after all.

Something moved, blocking the sun.

Eloran started. Raising a hand to shade her eyes, she could see it was a beast of some sort, with horns. A stag. But so big, far larger than any she'd ever seen.

Slowly, she stood. But far from being afraid, the stag merely pawed the dewy moss and watched her, a peculiar spark of intelligence in its soft brown eyes.

Beast and woman regarded one another for a long moment. Finally, Eloran felt compelled to do, well, something.

"Well," she said, then felt silly, talking to an animal.

But the stag cocked its head, then folded its gangly legs and lowered itself to the ground.

Realisation struck. The Mother had answered her call!

Without taking her eyes off the animal, she bent and retrieved her pack and cane, then stood and slowly approached the stag. It watched her, displaying no alarm, only snorting slightly when she reached out and petted it.

"Well, my friend, I hope you are well rested. We have a long journey ahead."

The stag snorted again, and jerked its head in movement eerily like a human nod. Smiling, Eloran breathed thanks to the Mother and lowered her weight onto the stag's back. At once, it stood up. Leaning over the beast's neck, she said, "You know, my friend, where I must go."

The stag gave another nod, then sprang away with so sudden and powerful a leap that Eloran was nearly thrown. For the remainder of the day Eloran was borne northward on the creature's back, mile after mile of forest passing swiftly beneath its hooves. It seemed tireless, and was able to find trails and paths where none were evident to her. Eloran eventually found herself atop a rocky promontory, overlooking a panoramic view of the Esengist valley. She pushed herself up for a better look; the stag immediately came to a halt.

Below her, the Esengist had broadened into an elongated lake, out of which two rivers flowed, the Esengist proper to the south, towards the sea, and a second, divergent stream, whose name escaped her, that tumbled to the west over the scarped edge of the highlands on which she now stood. For a long while she sat there, shading her eyes against the misty glare of the late afternoon sun and contemplating the view, while the stag patiently cropped scrubby grass sprouting among the rocks. Finally, she turned northward, and extended her sight.

The harsh clamour of the Keldi slammed into her with fearful, imminent intensity. She hastily withdrew, and slouched painfully back down over the stag's neck.

"Only a little farther, my friend," she whispered, "and then you will be relieved of your burden."

Once again, the stag bounded away.

More miles passed. But, as afternoon faded into evening, the stag began to falter and slow. Finally, it halted altogether. Eloran could see its growing alarm; even though sent by the Mother, its bestial nature could not be wholly denied. She could not expect it to carry her any closer to the Keldi. Dismounting, she faced it in the deepening twilight.

"Thank you, my friend," she said simply, with a stiff bow. The stag gave a snort, bowed its head once in return, then turned and bounded into the forest, immediately disappearing into the gloom. Eloran stared wistfully after it for a moment, then turned the opposite way, and began to walk.

Soon, she could see fires flickering among the trees ahead. No one was visible, but she could easily see who had lit them. Such reckless hate, so much wanton lust. She stopped, suddenly overwhelmed. Here she was, though she still had no idea of what she was going to do. She was counting on the Mother's continuing guidance. Yet, hadn't she asked enough? Hadn't the stag been sufficient boon?

And yet, what could she do, alone, an old woman, against an army? Even by projecting the sight, she could blind or deceive only a few at a time. Against them all, her strength would last only a moment.

An image came to her, unbidden. She saw some of the Sisters, the youngest ones, still mere girls, taken by the Keldi.

No!

She rubbed a hand across her eyes, trying to erase the image. No, she could not, would not, let that happen. She was the Matron; the Mother wouldn't abandon her now. The lingering doubts vanished, replaced by resolve. She extended her sight again, forcing herself to ignore the tumult of wild emotions around the fires, and instead dispassionately examine what confronted her. Then she considered what she needed to do. First, some rest. And then she need to learn more about these Keldi, and who or whatever had drawn them rampaging out of their northern hills.

And she could think of only one way to accomplish that.

Sunrise found Eloran trudging northward along the road, trying her best to look like an innocent traveller. She'd gone only a short distance when movement in the trees caught her eye. Turning, she found herself facing three tall, muscular men with tangled hair and beards, sporting short hafted axes and looks of suspicious hostility.

"Where're you goin', old woman?" one of them growled.

Fear squeezed her heart; for a wild instant, she thought of using the sight to blind them, and make her escape. But that would defeat her purpose. Instead, she gave her fear free rein and stammered, "L... I'm travelling to Fieren, to visit my sister."

Slow, unpleasant grins spread across their craggy faces. "You are, eh? Well, I'm thinkin' yer sister mightn't be there to welcome you."

"No, not if Burndir chanced 'pon her, eh?" a second put in, grinning. "He likes

the older ones."

The third grinned as well, but shook his head. "Before we give her to Burmdir or anyone else, best we take her to th' chieftain, eh?"

Eloran chose her next words carefully. "Please let me go. I have nothing you would value, and nowhere to go, with the road north and south aflame with war."

The third Keldi narrowed his eyes at her. "So you know something of the road south, eh?"

"I saw a great gathering of soldiers, all drawn up as though for battle. Please, let me go."

But the man ignored her. "See? We'd best let the chieftain have her."

Eloran was seized, her cane and satchel snatched from her. Her terror was genuine, but still, she felt a glimmer of satisfaction. They were taking her exactly where she wished to go. And only the Mother knew what would happen after that.

Soon, Eloran was bullied through a great, smoky camp of Keldi warriors lining the near side of the Esengist. Their sheer numbers stunned her. The soldiers who had come to the sanctuary had said there were many, but this host exceeded her wildest fears.

Something caught her eye. She stumbled, buying time to look. There, through the trees, drawn up on the mud of the river bank.

Boats.

There were dozens of boats and barges. Enough to bear the entire Keldi force swiftly down the river.

Eloran was dragged roughly back to her feet, but she ignored the bruising pain. The soldiers had said nothing of boats. And though she was no warrior, she knew enough of river craft to realise that the water borne Keldi would be upon the Southlands much sooner than anyone there expected.

That thought, however, paled beside another.

The river ran right beneath the Sanctuary walls.

Eloran briefly contemplated the horror of that, and then her attention was drawn to a wide clearing ahead. Within it, a great fire burned, around which figures, naked but for scraps of animal skin, uttered shrieks and wails as they danced about in some barbaric ceremony. Upon a seat of rough-hewn logs a huge man sat, fur-draped, iron-clad, watching over the spectacle. Thrust from behind into the clearing, Eloran sprawled amongst the dancing figures, who screamed at her as they whirled past. Then, as though at some signal, they stopped all at once, and silence fell.

Behind her, one of her captors spoke. "We found her on the road, Chieftain. Says she comes from the south, an' that she's seen soldiers."

The chieftain's gaze fell upon her like a rockslide.

And instantly, she knew. This man, this chieftain, had whipped the northlanders into this blood-frenzy.

"Tell me of the soldiers you saw, old woman, and I may yet let you die without pain."

Eloran's mind whirled. She'd seen so much, so much her people must know, if they were to defend themselves. And yet, here she was, helpless and facing death.

She glanced around. Here were hundreds, thousands of warriors and this chieftain, driving them on. And here were boats.

Something sparked among her panicked thoughts. There was something about the boats, something about the river. What was it?

The chieftain sat back, raising his hand in a dismissive gesture.

"Enough. The shamans can have her."

A low, hungry growl rose from the figures around the fire.

"Wait!"

The chieftain stopped at Eloran's cry and leaned forward again, but said nothing.

"I know little of war and its craft," she went on, "and care even less. To me, it seemed there were just endless ranks of mailed soldiers, all drawn up for battle."

The chieftain narrowed his eyes. "Where?"

Eloran fought to keep any hint of success out of her voice. She suddenly had some measure of value to the chieftain, and as long as that held true, however small, there was hope.

"Three or maybe it was four days south. I'm not sure. I dwell upon the river, and rarely travel the road."

The chieftain's eyes narrowed further. "So you know the river?"

"Yes. I've lived upon it nearly all my life."

Which was perfectly true, since she'd joined the Sisterhood as a young girl and called the sanctuary home ever since. But she left it at that, and simply waited.

The chieftain's gaze bore down upon her. Again, she considered extending the sight, and trying to nudge his thoughts further down the path she'd chosen. And again, she decided against it. To do so would be to further dissipate her remaining strength; furthermore, a brooding ambiguity surrounded the Shamans and their fire, suggesting that other, darker powers might be present. In the end, she simply let the chieftain see her for what she was, a lonely, frightened old woman.

And that was enough. The chieftain finally sat back and rumbled, "I will let you live for now. How long that favour lasts will depend upon how useful you prove to be. In any case, the Shamans will be hungrier for the wait." To the soldiers, he said, "Bind her, and keep her alive."

Hands grabbed her roughly from behind, eliciting a wince of pain that served to conceal her triumph, however transient it might turn out be.

That night was the most miserable Eloran had ever endured. Bound to a tree with coarse, chafing ropes, she hung in a position that set fire to every bruise and ache. She finally found solace by retreating as far from her suffering as possible into the Mother's warm embrace, and preparing herself for whatever the next day would bring.

Being roughly shaken by a Keldi warrior brought her back. Morning had come, cheerless and cold under a leaden overcast. Shouts and sounds of movement rose around her; she soon found herself being dragged along amid a large group of Keldi converging on the riverbank. Once there, she was taken on board the foremost boat, a crude barge of rough hewn timbers.

The Chieftain already stood on board, watching as the remainder of the flotilla prepared to make way. He spared Eloran only a passing glance, indicating that she should be tied against one gunwale. This done, she slumped onto the rough deck, forgotten.

Now began the most difficult task of all. She bowed her head and closed her eyes, extending her Sight, ignoring the seething emotions emanating from the Keldi and focusing instead upon the plan she had formulated during the previous night's meditation. So deep was her trance that she barely noticed when, with a great shout, they were pushed away from the bank and into the Esengist's broad current.

The morning passed. From time to time, Eloran was roughly shaken to ensure that she still lived, presumably but, for the most part, she was ignored.

And so it was that she dreamed.

She was falling.

She came awake. Blinking, she painfully raised her head, and saw that they had entered the lake from which the Esengist split into its two daughter courses. To the east was the rocky knoll upon which she and the stag had stood what, only the day before yesterday? She turned away; it didn't matter. What mattered was that with the current diminished, the Keldi now rowed, towards the southern course.

It was time.

One last time, Eloran extended her sight. But instead of merely passively gathering the thoughts of the Keldi, she drew them into her reach, and began to manipulate them, like clay on a wheel.

Terrified, Eloran watched as a vast, choking darkness rose, looming over her.

Most were pliant, easily changed. The Shamans were more difficult, but, bereft of their fire and their wild dance, their thoughts soon shifted at Eloran's insistent nudging. Only the chieftain's required real caution. His will was strong, burning with a hunger for dominance and conquest. But Eloran steeled her resolve, and shifted his perceptions with painstaking care.

There were writhing, malignant coils clutching at her.

Slowly, the flotilla began to swing westward.



The effort rapidly drained her strength. But she continued, regardless, to impress upon the Keldi her version of reality.

Instead of fleeing, she rushed forward, embracing it.

The boats passed into the western channel.

Now she was nearly spent. Desperately, she drew upon her final strength, feeling her heart falter. The first boats swung around a bend in the river. Ahead, water foamed white over jagged rocks.

For a final instant, she held them, feeling her essential self fade to a whisper. Then her sight dissipated, like smoke in a breeze. With the abruptness of a thunderclap, reality returned to the Keldi.

At once, shouts of alarm rose from among those on the lead boat. The chieftain jumped forward, staring, unbelieving, at the onrushing rapids.

Then he turned, facing Eloran. For a moment, their eyes locked, and a truth passed between them, even as the boat began to rock, mocking the attempts of its crew to control it. There was the sound of splintering wood. The Chieftain suddenly laughed, a chilling sound that cut through even the thunder of rushing water, and drew his sword.

Eloran watched, her sight dimming, as the Chieftain advanced on her. He shouted something, but she couldn't hear him, for the world was suddenly filled with sound. Now he was looming over her, raising the sword high.

Then he was gone, swallowed in a cloud of mist. It swirled coldly about her, and then, for an instant, it parted like a curtain, allowing her to see out to a far, green horizon. She had time to smile, thinking how lovely the sight was. And then the panorama was swept up and away as the boat pitched over the towering waterfall.

She was falling, and the darkness was falling with her.

Eloran looked upon the Mother's face, tasted of her milk, and was blessed.

Meliar put a hand on the young initiate's shoulder, and guided her gaze up to the peak of the thundering falls.

"Matron," the young girl said, "I'm trying to see the vision you told me about, the one you saw in your dream. But all I see is mist."

Meliar smiled. "I know, Little Sister. It will take time. It might even take several of these pilgrimages, before you begin to see."

The girl shaded her eyes. "I hope not. I would like to see Blessed Eloran. She must have been so wonderfully brave."

Meliar lifted her own eyes to the top of the falls called Martyr's Plunge and extended her sight through the rainbow glare of sun on mist. She, of course, had no trouble at all seeing the boat and its sole passenger, a woman, now and forever tall and young smiling at her as it plunged over the cataract.

She smiled back through sudden tears and nodded. "Yes, Little Sister," she

whispered, "she was."

## SPHERES OF MAGIC

Mark C. Alldis

Master Gawldwin limped into the workshop leaning heavily on his gnarled stick. The old man was short, made shorter by the stoop in his shoulders. A crystal sphere sat on the workbench for his inspection. The Master's clear blue eyes were on it. Tonan's chest swelled with pride. Vivid yellows, greens and blues swirled within the sphere's depths. It was perfect in its roundness.

The Master's face was hard as stone. His eyes narrowed, then his stick came crashing down on Tonan's work. The sphere rang like a bell, then shattered into a thousand glittering shards that rained down in a rainbow to the rough planks of the floor.

"Not good enough."

The words had a gravelly finality that cut as sharply into Tonan's heart as any of the fragments on the floor.

"But, Master, I followed the ancient texts." The words were torn from Tonan's throat. His eyes were on the glass that littered the floor. He raised them and searched the Master's face. "I sifted the sand not twice, but three times. I ground the mineral dyes so fine. Dust is courser. I worked the bellows until my arm was like lead. Finally, I formed the glowing mass, again as directed by the texts. What did I do wrong? What?" The last was asked with defiance.

"It was pretty, beautiful, actually. A bauble worth gold to grace some rich man's table, but you are not an apprentice glass maker. You strive here to form your Karis, the reservoir for your magic. For that it was not good enough."

Tonan fought back tears of anger. He had been so sure that he had achieved his goal of forming the perfect place to keep his magic. He was at his prime, his magic at its strongest. Without a Karis, it would not renew itself and be ready to come to his call. Each time he used it, it would diminish until it faded to nothing. He had no time left for failure.

"But tell me where I erred. I followed the ancient texts." I must succeed, he thought. I could not live without the feel of the magic. He looked at the Master. "I will try again."

The old man's eyes softened at his student's anguish. It was not a surety that Tonan would succeed. Many strong mages had lost their powers because they could not form a Karis. It had driven some mad. Tonan had the makings of a great mage, but was lost if he could not form his Karis.

"The final rite of magic mastery is the formation of the Karis. The texts tell you how to make the glass, but you have to find the secret of how to bring the sphere to life."

"But how?"

"I said too much already. The rest is yours to discover. And you will, Tonan. You will. Now get some sleep. You can clean this up tomorrow. Sleep. Find the answer in your dreams."

Tonan did not go to his small bare room immediately. He stared down at the shattered sphere for a long time. Then he made a sign that glowed in the air. The fragments came together in a heap. Another sign and the pile rose in the air and floated, at Tonan's command, to tumble slowly into the waste bin. A shameless waste of his power. The Master would have roared in anger at this, but he did not care.

I might as well use it up as lose it, he thought. Bring glass to life. Riddles! Why must everything concerning magic be in riddles?

He banked the furnace, taking his frustrations out on the embers. Sparks flew as he rammed the poker into them. He added more coal to insure that it would smoulder until morning. The bin was less than half full. Soon he would have to take the cart into the mountains and trade small magics for the coal the hillmen dug from under their mountains. Another waste of his power. With a last thrust of the poker, he left the workshop.

Master Gawldwin limped painfully to his room after leaving Tonan. As he crossed the threshold, his Karis stirred to life, pulsing with a glowing light that swirled among the colours frozen in the crystal. The glow gained strength as the Master approached. Gawldwin put his hand on it. Its light flared. The light within the sphere dimmed as its energy flowed into him. He straightened a little. When he removed his hand the glow grew, but was weaker. The magic lengthened his life, though each time he drew on it less remained.

"Soon, old friend, we will both be used up."

The glow seemed to react to his words.

"Tonan failed again. He'll learn. You'll see. It comes to them in the oddest ways. The good ones discover the secret."

The glow swirled amid its coloured glass.

Tonan tossed on his bed. He opened his eyes, then stared at the beams overhead. When he could not sleep he would look at the beams, following the cracks or create images in the marks left by the woodcutters, who had formed them centuries ago. The exercise usually freed his mind of whatever kept him from sleep, but not tonight.

Find the answer in my dreams, he thought. Dreams are powerful. They free the mind of earthly bounds to roam other planes, but they are unpredictable.

I may get answers, but won't know to what questions they belong. And riddles. There are riddles enough in magic. Dreams are riddles within riddles.

He rammed his fist into the straw. Sleep was a long time coming.

He was floating in a vast chamber. All around him were crystal spheres. Some glowed with the swirling light of Karises. Others were simply crystal spheres with colours at their centers. As he drifted through the chamber, the Karises floated away, while the lifeless crystal spheres moved towards him. The voices of the Karises echoed around him.

"We are not for you." The sound was like the chimes of silver bells.

"Why? Why are you not for me?" he screamed and they laughed. A crystal sphere attached itself to his foot. He tried, but could not pull it free.

"You refuse to give them life."

"I don't refuse. I don't know how." Another sphere attached itself to his body, taking root.

"You do. You do. It is within you to give them life."

"Tell me how. I will gladly give them life. Only tell me how." His body was nearly covered with spheres.

"You know."

"I don't."

"You refuse to give them life, them life, them life." The voices echoed into nothingness, as the spheres completely covered him. He struggled against them, smashing out with his fists. The spheres shattered at his blows. His hands were covered in cuts from the glass shards.

He awoke wet with sweat. What had it meant? He fell back to sleep trying to fathom it. When he woke up again, he was still tired.

He went to the basin and splashed cold water over his face, to chase the cobwebs from his mind.

He found the Master, who was sitting at the table by the hearth in the kitchen. A pot of porridge bubbled near the fire. Tonan ladled out a bowl, then brought it to the table. He added a large dollop of honey. He sat there stirring the porridge.

"It gets no sweeter the more you stir."

Tonan looked up and saw the Master watching him. Sheepishly, he spooned a mouthful from the bowl. The Master took out his pipe and began filling it with his blend of sweet herbs. Waving Tonan off, Galdwin went to the fire and lit a splint. Clouds of fragrant smoke filled the air.

"You dreamed last night?"

"I dreamed, but only more questions, no answers."

The Master returned to the table. He stretched out his leg and rubbed his thigh.

"It goes that way sometimes. The secret is to find your answers in the questions."

Tonan shook his head wearily. "Master, I have no time for more riddles." He pushed the bowl away.

"You will try again today?" Gawldwin tapped the ashes from the pipe into his empty bowl.

"I will try, but expect to have another pile of shattered glass for my efforts."

"We will see. We will see. Call me when you are ready."

Tonan watched the Master leave. The old man leaned heavily on his stick. Resigned to another failure, Tonan got up. Before he left, he swung the porridge pot away from the fire.

He cleaned the ashes from the furnace and piled more coal on the embers. Hours were spent sifting the sand to remove any dirt and achieve a uniform size of grain and in grinding the mineral dyes. He selected red, blue and yellow. When these were stirred into the molten glass, a rainbow should swirl in the depths of the sphere. If it was a failure, it would be a pretty one.

A crucible was filled with sand and soda in precise measurements and set in the furnace. He worked the bellows in a mind numbing rhythm that went on and on until the crucible glowed red filled with molten glass.

Using iron tongs, he removed the crucible and set it in a stand. He stared into the depths of the glass, feeling the scorching heat on his face. He measured the dyes, then stirred them into the glass with an iron rod. Nodding in satisfaction, he twirled a large portion on to the rod.

He began to form his sphere. He worked carefully. He spun the mass of glass to make a globe. When it was finished, he held it over a stand on the workbench. He ran a wet cloth around the point where the sphere was attached to the rod. This caused the glass sphere to come away.

He stared at his creation. The colours were true to his vision. A rainbow was captured within the sphere, but anger clouded his face. Why would this sphere be different from the last? He had done nothing different. Why would this one not end up as shards? He searched its depths for some sign of the glow that it had become a Karis, but found only the glow of heat.

It sat on the stand like the ones that had attached themselves to him in his dream, lifeless. Tonan saw his hopes of having a place for his magic failing.

"Give you life. I'll give you life," he roared. He grabbed the sphere in his hands to cast it to the floor. Agony ripped through him, as the hot glass seared his palms. He tried to pull his hands away, but couldn't. He screamed. He fainted.

The Master heard his cry and smiled. He got his stick and shuffled out of his room, taking his bag of healing herbs from its hook by the door. Tonan lay



on the floor, barely conscious, his hands bloody and raw. Gawldwin applied his herbs and wrapped Tonan's hands with clean strips of linen. Through all the Master's administrations, Tonan writhed on the floor.

"It wanted life. I gave it my flesh," he raved.

"Easy, lad. It's over. Drink this. It will ease the pain."

Tonan drank greedily, mindless to the bitter taste of herbs.

"Behold what your sacrifice has wrought." Gawldwin pointed to the sphere.

Tonan winced as he sat up, helped by the Master. His hands throbbed and his head hurt, but with his clearing vision he looked at his sphere. He expected to see his own flesh clinging to the glass in blackened strips, but the surface of the sphere was clear.

"You formed your Karis, Tonan. You gave it part of yourself and it took your magic. Your power is safe there."

Tonan saw the glow of magic swirling about the rainbow he had formed. He grabbed the Master's hand, ignoring the pain, and saw the scars of the Master's own ordeal. Scars he had kept hidden by magic.

"Yes, Tonan. We must all give of ourselves. However, the glass will not accept our gift, unless we learn the secret on our own."

"I gave it life."

"You gave it part of yourself. Now you and it are one."

Tonan stared at his Karis in wonder. The pain in his hands was forgotten. The Master helped him to his feet.

"Go to your Karis, Master Tonan."

Grinning like a child, Tonan went to his Karis.

## FALCON

Gerald Upton

I soar on the warm rising wind, my wings stretched out to catch it, my pin feathers spread. I feel the uplift of the warmed air supporting my limbs, pressing against the feathers of my breast. My tucked talons clench in spasms of ecstasy, and my eyes are half closed.

I wheel around the column of rising air, soaring higher and higher,

forgetting for now my mission in the glory of flying

Movement catches my eye. To the south lies a speck in the sky, a soaring falcon like myself. With my falcon's eyes, I can tell that she is female. By the cant of her tale feathers, I see she seeks a mate. I could go to her. She would accept me in this form.

Yet, my fate, my true mistress, is to the east.

The column of air is cooling, dying off, losing its lift. If I want to rise higher, I must seek another. To the west I can detect the upward flow of air. I wheel.

No, I tell myself. I have something more important to do. I will go flying again.

I hesitate. I put it off, because what I am about to do will change my life drastically, if not end it completely. I am free for now. There are no thongs dangling from my claws, but there are jesses on my tough heart. I must seek my mistress, though it might kill me.

I wheel again, banking sharply, slipping to the side, losing my wind. Ahead is my destiny. I settle into a long glide, and there, before me, far below, I see the white stone castle. She is still there. I know it.

I have lost track of time in my soaring, and gone much too high. I glide o'er top the great stone confection. I am well above it. Even situated high up in the mountains as it is, it is still far below me.

Yet it is a joy to put off arrival for a while still, to circle slowly down, gliding in great loops, losing air, coming lazily lower. I spy guards on the walls, but they do not see me. Stupid humans have no eyes to see with.

At last I am just a mite higher than the castle. I single out the tower where she is, the white and yellow stone tower with the red cone of a roof. I target the highest window. I make a quick turn, lose some more air and am in a glide right for it.

As I approach, I put my pin feathers down, and my claws out and forward. I back-wing twice and land, a proud landing on the window sill.

Inside, in the room, there is motion, sound, the human maiden, the mistress of my heart, Ullrud.

She has heard the slight noise of my alighting, felt the slight rush of air, and has turned to see. She looks at me in startlement. Poised, she knows not what to make of me.

She is comely for a maiden, with flowing raven hair and bright sharp eyes, and hardly a beak at all. Her long slim form, closely clad, would fly well if she had but wings. I am here to give them to her.

Still she has not stirred toward me. She does not recognize me, of course. Does she fear to fright me away? She cannot yet know that I had to seek her out.



"Hola, bird," she says in her very soft voice. It would not frighten a bird, and it thrills me in truth. I have waited many days to hear that word again. "Are you tired, bird? Are you here for a short rest, here in my little aerie?"

I am here to free her. I am here to bring her my love. I open my beak to tell her so.

"Mrrrk. Skrrrk."

That will not do. That can only frighten her off. I will have to be patient.

"Well, noble bird, keep me not in suspense. Turn and fly away from my prison. I would that I could fly away with you."

You shall. Come to me.

"Why do you stay, bird? What brings you here? Are you a tame bird? Are you a sending?"

Yes, I am. Come to me, and I shall show you.

"You are such a beautiful bird. You have most pretty golden plumage. I would that you would stay. I have been alone and lonely these many days. I could use a friend."

I am the best friend you will ever have. I am your lover. Come closer.

"Still you stay," she says softly, perplexed, holding herself still. "You look most noble. I fain would try to pet you, bird, but I fear me it would drive you away. I can appreciate even your silent company."

I step forward to the inside of the sill, then hop down onto the desk beyond. I am feeling most awkward, fully aware of the contrast of my present movements to my graceful swooping on air. I pause, and duck my head to my mistress.

She hesitates. "I almost think you are here apurpose, noble hawk. Please, be not afrighted of what I do." Finally, she moves slowly toward me. She still fears I will leave her. I will never leave her. She can kill me now, I will accede, but she cannot frighten me. I wish I could tell her so.

Now she's just in reach. "Will you flee, if I reach out to pet you, fierce looking creature of the air? You are so beautiful I feel I must." She stretches forth her slim hand to me, slowly, slowly. I turn slightly so she can touch my back.

"Oh! You will!" she sighs gently, as her fingers touch me. Like a warm breeze, she caresses me softly.

"Mrrrk," I pronounce quietly, hoping it will encourage her.

"Oh, you noble creature. You are most brave!" She strokes me again, and yet again. Finally, at her tender touch, a loose feather from my plumage comes away and falls softly to the desk top. That is what I have waited for.

"Oh!" she gasps, "Are you alright? Or have you left that solely for me? Is it a token of your friendship?"

For answer I say "Skrrrk," and ruffle my wings. She pulls away just a bit.

With a slight spread of wings I hop to the floor. She eyes me in wonder, and well she might.

I feel the change come upon me. There's a wondrous glow and tingle as my limbs harden and lengthen, my body fills out, my feathers blend in and become smooth again. The room and the maiden shrink about me as I grow in stature. Finally, I am finished, able to see again with human eyes, to touch, to hold. To speak.

"Udigo!" she says in wonderment, "it is you!"

"Yes, my Love. I have come for you, though your father bar the way with four and twenty armed and armoured blackguards."

Then she sees me properly for the first time, and she blushes. "Udigo! You are unclothed! It is unseemly!"

"Other than feathers, it is all that I could wear, if I were to come to you this way."

"Ah! And how did you come to me this way?"

"I have paid much of value to a witchy woman to make me this way. I can make you like this too, if you wish to come with me."

"I am sore tempted. My father has had me mured up here these two weeks, and swears I will wed the Count of Norbonne in another two. He cares not that I love another."

"I Tell me that it is I"

"What, and give you power over me? Of course it is you. Did you think there was aught else for me?"

I open my arms to her. "Then you will come away with me?"

There is banging on the door. "Princess," says a rough voice from without, "who are you talking to?"

"I only speak to myself," she calls out. "I am bored and lonely."

"Shall I send for your maid?" asks the guard's voice through the door. "Aha! She comes now."

Ullrud flies to the door, and drops the bar to close it firm. The guard is set to stop her from leaving. They have not thought they might ever have to come in.

"Yes," she says breathlessly from the door to me, "I will come away with you. But how can I leave?"

"Princess," calls he from without, "the door will not open. Your maid would come in. Please open the door." It is phrased as a request, but it is voiced as a demand.

"By your own hand," respond I with a handsweep to indicate the dropped plumage. "I have left you a feather. Take it up in that hand with which you caused it to fall." She flies to the desk, and takes my golden feather.

"Princess," says the rude voice from without, "I hear voices. Is there someone in there with you? Open this door at once, or we will be required to break it in!"

"Quickly!" she inquires of me, "what else?"

"Doff your clothes," I respond.

She scowls fiercely at me. "Is this but a ruse?"

"I would lose my life but to see you naked? No, you may not fly in aught but your natural form. Remove your vestments."

From without: "Princess, once more I demand. Unbolt this door!" Still she hesitates to disrobe before me.

There is a crash at the door, with some splintering of the small bar. It is not designed to withstand a heavy siege.

"My Love," I say with some urgency, "I must leave this place anon, with you or without you. I shall die quickly if I am caught here with you, especially as I have no clothes. Will you come away with me?"

There is a louder crash at the door. The poor bar cries its agony as it begins to be torn asunder. It wishes to do its duty, but it is not strong enough. It will hold out barely a while in an attempt at rearguard.

A fleeting look at me from Ullrud, and then she gives me her answer. She pulls strongly at her dress, frantically yanking it over her head. It floats to the floor, where it is quickly joined by such mysterious underclothes as women are prone to wear. Finally she stands beside me as nature intended. I would gaze upon her natural beauty, but there is not time.

Once again there is an assault upon the door. The poor lock is almost undone, a splinter only holding it together.

"The feather in your eating hand," I recite to her from memory. She already has it there. "Place your heart hand in my strong hand. Now, I will do the rest."

I will the change. I feel myself shrinking down, the room rising up around me. Beside me, Ullrud too is changing.

The door slams open, and the guard falls into the room. He has not expected it to be so easy this time, and sprawls headlong. A giant splinter of the bar, jagged point forward, flies close past my love.

Behind the offending guard, others wait in confusion.

With a flap of my wings, I bound to the desk top. "Skrrrk," I call, come, my mate, and Ullrud jumps up beside me, resplendent in her russet plumage. "Mrrrk," I tell her, come experience the joys of flying.

I leap for the window. The guard is up and lunging for me clumsily. However, I am out and away, plummeting to a glide. I look back with anxious eye. The fool guard may very well crush what he was set to protect, Ullrud, my Love.

No, she is not far behind me, taking to the air. She seems slightly awkward, but I can forgive her that. It is her first time.

I slip to one side, brake with my tail feathers, and watch her pull up beside me. Now we will soar together.

## UNCERTAIN FOES

Kathleen O'Sullivan

Mar'gug crept steadily along the uneven stone floor. Bereft of light, she kept one hand always on the rough cave wall. With the other she gripped the shoulder strap of her haversack. The pressure she exerted turned her knuckles white.

Somewhere in the passage behind she could hear the creature that was tracking her. Bits of rock grated, stone against stone, beneath its feet. She closed her eyes for a moment, willing the spell to work. Holding her scratched, bleeding fist before her, she concentrated. A flickering blue light engulfed her hand.

The irksome noises from the creature behind her stopped long before Mar'gug's sturdy legs tired. Her witch light began to dim. It flickered in spurts and starts. Feeling the light touch of moving air, she turned down into a smoother cut passage. The end of the passage opened into a huge cavern.

Half way across her witch light went out. Her heart barely moved. Her breath chilled in her chest. Carefully she listened as she crunched down, hands splayed upon the sureness of the damp stone beneath her feet. Slowly she stood up, turned around and walked unsteadily back towards the entrance of the passage.

She slid down the wall, coming to rest on the cold floor. She pulled the haversack off her shoulder, and felt inside for the last of her food. Choking down an away biscuit without water, she found, was a difficult thing to do.

Her throat was scratchy. It hurt to swallow. Stiffly she leaned forward. With her hand in front of her, she willed the witch light into existence. Pale blue light sputtered and went out. She tried again. She let her hand drop. There had to be a way to get through these passages. After all, she thought to herself, I have travelled the caverns of Tytywyth all of my life. Her eyes strained through the solid blackness.

Her witch light would burn. She would find water. The creature she had disturbed would trouble her no longer. She would complete her journey to Boreas and deliver the message she bore for the Snow King of the Elves. She repeated the words softly to herself, like a mantra, over and over. Willing her fears to subside, she

held out her hand and called for the witch light. The light was not nearly as bright as it should have been. She stood and put her haversack over her shoulders, then continued out into the open cavern.

It was the largest cavern she had been in since she had left the familiar passages of her home on the continent of Abreth. Standing very still, she tried to discern where the moving air was coming from. All the air in these passages reeked of moldy dampness. It surrounded and depressed her.

She took a deep shuddery breath and tried to relax. Closing her eyes for a moment she listened. The hushed whistle of moving air drew her to the right, directing her towards the source. Engulfed in the eerie blue glow of witch light, she treaded across the huge, smooth floor, the slap of her booted footfalls echoing faintly.

Drunwal leaped into a hiding place, behind a pile of boulders, and watched the Mountain Troll closely. He had not thought he would find her again, after she had escaped him in the upper passages. The Mountain Troll disappeared down a tunnel and he followed silently after.

Mar'gug stepped out of the passage onto the edge of a precipice that fell away into a black gorge. Her witch light sputtered as she watched the rope and plank bridge jerk in the strong breeze. She tested the strength of the creaking old rope. Frustrated, she kicked the lichen covered anchor post. It cracked.

Drunwal crept down the dark tunnel. He stopped when he heard the Mountain Troll mumbling to herself. He chuckled, a low ominous sound that made Mar'gug whirl around to face the opening to the passage.

"Who's there?" She drew her knife out of the worn leather sheath at her hip. She glanced back at the rope bridge. There was no way for her to escape this time and she did not want to fight here on the bridge. Beads of perspiration began to drop off her high forehead. Her palm felt hot clutched around the knife hilt. The pack on her back began to feel uncomfortably heavy. What if she did not reach the Snow Elf King in time?

"Who is there? Come on! Stop playing these games and show yourself." She planted her feet firmly on the stone floor, her back to the gorge, the witch light held over her head, the knife grasped tightly.

Drunwal peered out of the end of the passage. He could see the Mountain Troll, standing defensively, staring at him as he scuttled out onto the precipice to face her.

Mar'gug almost staggered as Drunwal finally showed himself. "No!" she said, her voice filled with disbelief, "Gargoyle!"

"Mountain Troll," he said delightfully, as he looked Marl'gug's stocky body up and down. His thin lips peeled back to reveal the stained jagged points of his teeth. His sickly pale grey skin hung in folds off his emaciated body.

Warily, Marl'gug watched him as she carefully stepped backwards towards the bridge post. "What are you doing here?" she squeaked. She stood staring at him, a Gargoyle, one of the Leshyie, a Dark Faerie, here in the very passages that led to Boreas.

"I live here. What are you doing here?" he inquired with a crooked smile. "Come for dinner, perhaps?" He licked his lips with a fat, black tongue. Suddenly, his hand shot forward. With surprising strength, he pulled Marl'gug away from the gorge's edge, just as her foot slipped and she began to fall. She dropped her dagger to the floor. Her witch light snapped out.

Marl'gug stared wildly through the dark, trying to rub the prickly feel of the Gargoyle's scaled skin off her upper arm.

"No need to be afraid of old Drunwal. Do you have anything to eat in your bag?" he inquired as he poked at her haversack with a long, knobby finger.

Marl'gug jumped back and banged into the stone wall. "No," she snapped. In a calmer voice she asked, "Do you know the way to Boreas?"

He began to scuffle back down the passage. "Boreas? Yes."

"Which way is it?" She tried to concentrate on getting her witch light going again.

"Drunwal knows the way. You follow me."

Marl'gug managed to call up her witch light and retrieved her dagger, concealing it in her hip pocket.

"Faerie light. Bah!" Drunwal exclaimed, his arms flying up to cover his face. "You Faeries can't see in the dark?"

"Not very well. At least not when it's this dark."

"Stay behind me then."

Drunwal led Marl'gug back across the chamber into the opposite passage. She followed behind closely, watching the Leshyie's back, a nervous lump in her throat. "How long have you lived down here?" she asked, trying her best to seem at ease.

"Not long. When Alinkos opened the Portal, many of us managed to escape from Tim Aill. He is very persuasive. Many of the Leshyie, from the Gargoyles to the Tree Squeaks, have decided to follow him. He laughed at us when we suggested peace. He said there is no way the Leshyie and the Faeries can share Tylwyth. If we want our freedom, we will have to fight for it. So, what say you, Troll? Do we fight?"

Marl'gug stopped walking. "No!" she answered forcibly. "Why not send your own envoy to the High King and the Guardian? If the Leshyie truly want

peace, then..."

Drunwal spun around to face her, the talons on his toes scraping the rock floor. Her voice caught in her throat. She took a stumbling step back.

"Why not?" he sneered. "Then?" He began to chuckle. The sound made Marl'gug shiver. Slowly she reached into her pocket, wrapping her hand around her dagger hilt. "Then, what? Just how do you suppose we would send an envoy? There was no way out of Tírn Aíll. Unless you could find a rift. Then you might wander for years before finding a way out. Aliríkos' magic repaired the Portal to Tylwyth. He offered us a way out and a chance at freedom."

"Aliríkos doesn't want to help you. By the time he's done exacting his revenge on the Faeries for banishing him, Tylwyth won't be any better than Tírn Aíll. Don't you see? He wants you to fight his war for him. You. You, yourself could come with me to the Snow Elf King. I carry a message for him. If he heard what you have to say and the Leshyie were willing, I'm sure..."

Again Drunwal laughed, stopping Marl'gug in mid sentence. "You Faeries are all alike. Stupid. Always trying to see the good in people. Light and dark can never meet." Drunwal shrugged, then continued out into a cavern, whose floor started to gently slope upward.

"What about twilight?" she said softly as she followed behind, eyes boring into Drunwal's back.

"What about it?" he growled.

"Light and dark become one for a few moments, just before the night and the dawn."

He shook his bald head from side to side. "We are and always shall be entirely different creatures, whether we be Gargoyles or Mountain Trolls, Ogres or Elves. We could never trust one another. Otherwise you would not be touching that dagger so tightly."

Marl'gug swallowed hard. "We could learn to trust each other. If the Faerie races of light and darkness are to survive, we have to learn how. The ways into the Earth beyond are closing. The crystals that power the Portals don't work anymore. It's affecting everything. Even my witch light," she added sadly.

"Are you sure you have no food?" he asked, ignoring her remarks.

"No. Sorry. Not a bit."

He stopped in front of a narrow crevice where the wall met the floor. Slowly he crouched down, "Mmm." A sudden shrill squeak stopped short as Drunwal stuffed a large banded beetle into his smacking mouth. "Want one?" he asked between bites.

Gagging, Marl'gug quickly shook her head.

Drunwal reached the top of an incline and belched. He stood perfectly still for a moment. Then he sighed, a long tired sound, as he motioned Marl'gug

forward. "You follow the opposite passage," he pointed ahead, "turn left, another left, through a large glowing cavern of stone teeth, then right and it will lead you right out into the Snow Elf King's village. It shouldn't take you more than half a day," he told her. "If you tell the Elves that I am here, they will hunt me down, you know."

"I won't tell them. Thank you," she said, with a catch in her voice. Hesitantly, she let go of her dagger, and extended her hand to Drunwal. "I am Marl'gug."

Gingerly, he shook her hand. "I had planned on eating you, Marl'gug. Maybe I should have," he said as he picked a piece of the beetle's shell out from between his teeth. "Perhaps, when you travel back this way you could bring me some food."

"Of course. As much as I can carry." She turned away, about to leave, then asked, "Could you show me the way back to Abreth?"

Drunwal nodded. With a slight smile upon his face, he said, "Perhaps we can find peace together. We could talk about it on the way."

## RUNIC BARDS

**Mark C. Alldis** of Stoney Creek, Ontario has had a number of his stories published and is also editor of *DISTANT SUNS*.

**Ellen Dawn Benefield**, who lives in California, has had a number of humorous sf and fantasy pieces published.

**Jeff Carter**, who has some background in the Middle Ages and alchemy, lives in the American South.

**Cecelia Holland** has published more than twenty novels of historical fiction. She lives in California.

**David Laderoute** is a writer of fantasy and science fiction who lives with his family in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

**Beatrice C. Lanctot** who lives in Washington State has had a story in *MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY MAGAZINE*.

**D. K. Latta** is a writer residing in Kingston, Ontario.

**D. Sandy Nielsen** is a member of the Brampton Writers' Guild and Visual Arts Brampton. He has had at least three shows of his paintings, most of which deal with Viking related themes. He belongs to Who-Dun-Its, a group of mystery lovers. He has two cats named Thor and Loki.

**Mai Nguyen** is an Ottawa artist whose studies include Oriental calligraphy.

**Kathleen O'Sullivan** of Clarendon N.B. has been working on the Tylwyth



adventures for close to fifteen years. Finally able to concentrate on her writing full time, The project includes six novels and a number of short stories.

Owen Oulton, a frequent contributor to BARDIC RUNES, lives in Ottawa.

Gerald P. Upton was born in Quebec about 45 years ago, has lived in Montreal, Ottawa and now the Toronto area. He has been writing for thirty years, is a member of the Canadian Author's Association and Mensa and is a great aficionado of classical music.

### Orders and Submissions

Additional copies of BARDIC RUNES are available for \$4.00 each or by subscription for \$10.00 for three issues. Those living in Canada may pay in Canadian funds. Those living outside Canada should pay in US funds or equivalent. Cheques are to be made payable to Michael McKenny and sent to:

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James R. Field

as the best of that issue.

Readers are invited to write the editorial address (see page 2) and cast their ballot. The winner will be announced in the following issue.

